

## **DRAFT BIO FOR R.D. WEBSITE (unexpurgated)**

(revised from ROSS DOWSON OBITUARY April 1 H.K.)

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## **PART 1: YOUTH**

Ross Jewitt Dowson, Canada's foremost Trotskyist leader for a half a century, was born in Toronto on September 4, 1917, not without some irony on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. He was raised in west Toronto, the third eldest in a family of seven siblings. His father, a skilled printer and self-educated, militant atheist and humanist who introduced Ross to radical thought spawned in him an interest in ideas and literature. The smell of printer's ink which emanated from a printing press and type font racks stored in his parents' basement for odd printing jobs stayed with Ross his whole life. His mother, the daughter of a school principal, contributed to the family income as a stenographer. She attempted at an early age to enthruse Ross with religious training at the local churches but Ross sought his spiritualism elsewhere and was dissuaded from attending Sunday school because his oft-expressed skepticism embarrassed the church staff.

From his early youth, Ross seemed to interest himself in everything and he threw himself with abandon into whatever he pursued. He was an avid tennis player. And for a time he was a serious amateur photographer.

Ross was both a product and a shaper of the times he lived in. And what times they were! Ross Dowson came to maturity at a time of the Great Depression, a witness to the madness of the capitalist system. He had seven siblings, both male and female, older and younger in his family. Young Ross had to learn how to find a place of his own while at the

same time accept the discipline of being part of a large family. He was a serious young boy who was given the all-important task of ensuring that his skilled printer father made it home Friday evenings with his weekly paycheck intact and not dissipated at the local bar. An anarchist and independent thinker, Ross' father introduced all his children to the joy of ideas and literature. Such an interest lasted throughout Ross' life.

The depression taught Ross what it meant to be a member of the working class. He saw hunger, strikes, marches, demonstrations and police repression. He witnessed people who had little share what they had while those who had plenty keep it all to themselves. During this time, inspired by the love of books he inherited from his father Ross read the novels and writings of John Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Andre Malraux, Emile Zola, John Reed and Jack London. A vision of a better world burnt feverishly in his soul.

Ross also picked up in large doses a common characteristic of all members of the Dowson clan: a sense that they could achieve whatever it is that they wanted and that they could decide for themselves what they were going to do with their lives. Ross seemed to interest himself in everything and he threw himself with abandon into whatever he pursued. He was an avid tennis player. And for a time he was a serious amateur photographer.

It was during the 1930's that Ross became involved in the Trotskyist movement whose cadres in Toronto and in Vancouver were deeply imbedded in industrial unions following their expulsion from the Communist Party starting in 1928. Murray Dowson,

Ross' elder brother by two years, had joined the Trotskyist Workers' Party of Canada while a student at York Memorial Collegiate in north-west Toronto. The Workers' Party was established in 1934 by Jack McDonald, former leader of the Communist Party, and Maurice Spector, who had earlier been the Communist Party's principal theoretician. These giants of the Communist movement became signatories of an appeal initiated by Trotsky in 1935 for the creation of the Fourth International following the complete Stalinization of the Communist Third International and its conversion from a revolutionary to a reformist and counter-revolutionary force. The Fourth International was eventually launched in 1938.

#### **A. Becoming a revolutionist**

Ross tagged along with Murray, a nuisance Murray found hard to shake, to meetings of the Party. Ross was impressed by the classes on scientific socialism held by the Mount Dennis Spartacus Club named after the courageous slave rebel leader of ancient Rome. At the age of 17, Ross announced to his bewildered mother and his family that he had decided to dedicate his life to being a professional revolutionary, whereupon he formally joined the Trotskyist movement, in the middle of the depression years, in which he remained until his last breath 67 years later.

Dowson, who was until that time a complete product of the "Canadian experience" was suddenly exposed to the chaotic and heady mix of intellectual ferment in a movement which had a large contingent of members with European backgrounds. During the later years of the depression, while still a student, Ross collected money for the

McKenzie-Papineau Brigade; he supported the Eaton's Garment Factory strikers in Oshawa and the autoworkers strikers whose Toronto locals in the United Auto Workers were later among the first to affiliate to the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, the CCF, precursor to the New Democratic Party. He sold the Vanguard, the Workers Party's paper and he helped organize open air meetings at Earls Court Park. One day, he was encouraged to do the speaking himself. From then on, there was no turning back.

Ross learned how to run the Gestetner duplicator, he participated in May Day marches and unemployed workers' demonstrations, and built the Workers' Party. It was during this time that he met Maurice Spector, who, with James P. Cannon, a leader of the U.S. Socialist Party had attended the 1928 Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow. They were the first in North America to become partisans of Leon Trotsky whose perilous isolation in Russia shortly afterwards led to his exile in 1929, his supporters being expelled from Communist Parties throughout the globe, including Canada. Spector managed to smuggle out from Russia Trotsky's critique of the direction of the Comintern whose revolutionary program and policies were being sacrificed by an increasingly bureaucratic and conservative leadership under Stalin.

Although the Canadian Party was limited in its political influence, Ross quickly became politically cross-fertilized by the intellectual ferment within the Workers' Party, which had significant connections both to Jewish trade unionists and to Ukrainian comrades who published their own paper in the Ukrainian language. He sold copies of the Vanguard

at factories, organized a Trotskyist youth group at York Memorial Collegiate, tried unsuccessfully to organize a union at Canada Packers where he worked during the summers and played an active role in vying with the larger Communist Party for leadership of the unemployed workers' movement and, in particular, the unemployed youth, who were fighting to receive cash relief instead of food vouchers.

During this time, Ross was part of a group which helped workers who were subject to mass evictions move their furniture back into their homes and which helped the homeless take possession of Coronation Park at Keele and Eglinton. For two months they built burrows in the ground, with shacks overhead for shelter, until the police broke up the occupation. Ross was particularly active in the movement for the right of the unemployed to receive cash relief instead of dehumanizing food vouchers. He recalls feasting on baked goods and sweets at the home of an activist friend who lived across the road where he would attend discussions following meetings at a local hall. This was a real treat for Ross, who, as one of seven children, subsisted on a stripped-down diet of barley soup, beans, bread and jam.

Following the spring of 1936 during the Moscow Trials when the campaign against Trotskyism became especially vicious, comrades who sold the Trotskyist paper were frequently attacked by Stalinist goon squads. Jack MacDonald, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, who was expelled following Trotsky's exile from Russia in 1929, had retired from the Workers' Party by this time. After Maurice Spector left Toronto for New

York to work full-time for the Socialist Workers Party alongside its leader James P. Cannon, the Workers Party lacked a central and coherent leadership.

In June 1936, after completing grade 13, Ross' life was at a turning point. With his father no longer working, he got a job to help support his family. At the same time, he continued to focus on his political work on building the Workers Party, organizing aid for the Spanish revolutionists and defending working class actions from attacks by Canadian fascists.

He also participated in the pioneering efforts of the Workers Party to enter and join the CCF on the basis of critical but unconditional support to the party as representing independent labor and farmers' political interests. It was during this time that the Cooperative Commonwealth Youth Movement (CCYM) Executive withheld a club charter from a club Ross had organized on his own initiative. The CCF bureaucrats wanted no club at all rather than one that had Ross in it.

## **B. The issue of entryism**

Perhaps the central strategic problem that small revolutionary Marxist organizations have had to face over the decades, in several countries including Canada, is their relationship to the much larger mass-based labor, Socialist and Communist parties. Ross's approach to this issue was not clarified overnight and reflected the difficult lessons which he learned in the 1930s.

The issue of entryism was not easily resolved within the Workers Party. Trotskyists and others under their influence, especially from Toronto and Vancouver had already been present in significant numbers as delegates from industrial unions and ridings at the founding Convention of the CCF in Regina in 1933. However, the bureaucratic manipulation by the CCF leadership and the lack of momentum in the CCF and red-baiting by the leadership caused internal friction within the Workers Party over the entry tactic whose only known version at that time was the “French Turn”. Entryism had been experienced only in its “deep” variant into the mass workers’ parties and the dissolution of the Trotskyist organization’s public face. Comrades were considered “closed,” that is, they did not identify themselves openly as Trotskyists as a rule and they therefore gave up publishing their own paper.

At a convention of the Workers’ Party following a heated debate, by a vote of 35 to 20, the convention decided to enter the CCF, which it did in May, 1937. The minority, however, refused to liquidate their public face in order to participate in the entry and continued to distribute Trotskyist literature publicly although they stopped publishing the Vanguard. However, the anticipated growth of the left wing of the CCF did not materialize. Soon, the Trotskyists who had entered the CCF as individuals and not as a recognized tendency were feeling demoralized by the lack of vitality in the CCF. Eventually each component of the Trotskyist movement, the one that stayed outside of the entry and the one that participated in it, disintegrated as coherent organizations.



Ross initially worked inside the CCF. However, by disposition he identified politically with those comrades in the Worker's Party who opposed the "deep" entryism into the CCF and the liquidation of the paper as the public face of the Trotskyist movement at a time when the CCF was less than a viable and growing force.

It was at this time that Ross began to develop his flexibility to apply political principles to complex situations. From the majority, he learned of the importance of orienting to the mass expression of independent class politics which the CCF had begun to represent. From the minority, he recognized the necessity of the movement maintaining an independent public profile – above all its own press, and that a headquarters or bookstore and public forums were critical in maintaining the visibility of the movement as a pole of attraction.

He also learned that the movement had to maintain its independent organizational existence, even if only in a covert form, in order to maintain political clarity in "the swamp" that characterized the careerist, bureaucratic milieu nurtured by the opportunistic CCF leadership. This could be done by having some comrades play a "closed" role inside the CCF while other comrades, those previously expelled from the CCF, would be "open". It was as a result of these difficult lessons learned in the 1930s that the Canadian Trotskyist movement developed the perspective that enabled it to develop into a movement numbering in the hundreds and influencing thousands and tens of thousands decades later.

From the minority he also learned that the CCF-NDP could be the focus of the movement's politics, but not necessarily the main arena of political activity at all times, especially when the Party was shrinking and in retreat. The concept of entryism on the basis of fraction work with a long-term, non-split perspective was unique in the world Trotskyist movement, contrasted sharply with the "deep entryism" of the US comrades in the Socialist Party and the French comrades throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. It constitutes Ross' most significant and lasting contribution to the tactics of the world Trotskyist movement.

It was natural that Ross would tend to identify with the forces of Trotskyism that wanted to be open about their ideas. He hated wavering. He was repelled by people that were less than honest about their views and were open to manipulation. The petit-bourgeois leadership of the CCF, its tendency to adapt itself to whatever way the political wind was blowing and its lack of firm working class roots and class solidarity were alien to his character. Although he knew that he had to present his views concretely in a way that would be meaningful to the majority of advanced workers, he was personally uncomfortable with restraining himself from the full expression of his views. It was therefore logical for Ross to feel personally more at ease proclaiming his views openly and not engaging in tactical adaptation. Thus, from the time that Ross was expelled from the CCYM while still a teenager, he remained on a personal level an "open" comrade for the rest of his life.

In these early years of applying an orientation to a labor formation such as the CCF, the sophisticated positions that were worked out under Ross's leadership in later years were yet to be fully developed. An effort that was only partially successful was made to fuse the majority and minority positions. Although entryism was to last only until the fall convention of the CCF in 1938, the majority of comrades wanted to continue their experience with entryism afterwards. The minority wanted unity with the majority but was in limbo. The majority under the leadership of the well-known poet and writer Earle Birney, and other intellectuals, continued the entry into the CCF, even publishing a left-wing paper until they were finally expelled in 1938, in an unceremonious conclusion to their entrism experiment.

The comrades then re-established their political presence by publicly launching the Socialist Workers' League (SWL). This happened at a time when war clouds were on the horizon. Before they could consolidate and renew their national connections, the Second World War broke out. The War Measures Act was proclaimed. And the Canadian Trotskyist movement was driven underground.

## **PART 2     THE WAR YEARS**

The times were tough for a movement that openly opposed the war. Although continuing to work at various jobs between 1938 and 1942 to support himself and his family, Ross found time to organize anti-fascist demonstrations and defend opponents of the Second World War. The Socialist Workers' League saw its forces decimated, especially its

intellectual leadership, and was abandoned by Earle Birney who unexpectedly and without warning left politics and Marxism as a whole and enlisted in the army. With Trotsky's murder in Mexico by a Stalinist agent in August 1940, the movement suffered another blow.

The few remaining forces of the League decided to get jobs in basic industry in 1941 in order to implant themselves in the key trade unions. During this time of decline of open revolutionary activity, Ross picked up the loose strings, trying to create a united movement and keep the public face of the SWL going under the conditions of illegality following the proclamation of the War Measures Act, including distributing an underground paper until 1942. Accepting responsibility for the functioning of the movement as a whole, Ross for the first time moved from becoming a leader of the movement to becoming **the** leader of the movement.

This transformation took place under conditions of extreme adversity and became a challenge that framed Ross with a disposition that reflected the weightiness of the task before him and with a disdain for political dilettantes. Ross did not suffer fools gladly and saw the dissidents around the movement, especially the kibbitzers and raconteurs, as threatening its unity. He was suspicious of dissenters, perhaps excessively so as he had seen them abandon the movement or threaten it with interminable debate. He took over the publication of the banned paper which was inserted into library books or dropped from tall buildings on crowds of workers in downtown Toronto until it stopped publication in June, 1942. With limited opportunities for open work, Ross undertook to pull together the

meager forces that continued to identify with Trotskyism on the basis of political clarity and program. As the editor of the paper, he became engaged in developing a political line and a series of demands that would address the interests of workers at their present state of consciousness but help engage them to struggle for socialism.

### **C. First a cross-Canada tour, then a tour in the Army**

In 1941, Ross went on a western tour where he renewed connections that the movement had established during the 1930s. It was a difficult trek that took Ross to various centres including Saskatoon, Lloydminster, Medicine Hat, Alberta and eventually Vancouver, where he met many old militants. In Vancouver, he spent a month with Paddy Stanton, an ex-Wobbly, active in the CCF, who led local struggles against the wartime no-strike pledge promoted by the Communist Party, which suppressed working class demands in order to support the war effort.

Shortly afterward Ross traveled back to Toronto and enlisted in the army in 1942, which was then a precondition to getting a job. His doctor assured him he would be rejected because he had flat feet. Instead, to his surprise, he found himself donning a uniform in 1942 and conscripted into the service of Her Majesty's Armed Forces. For the next two years, Ross was stationed at Camp Borden advancing from private to corporal in the Canadian infantry and eventually becoming a second lieutenant. He tried to resign from his commission, which would have given him greater freedom as a private, but his efforts were rebuffed by the army brass. Still, he was able to circulate anti-war literature to his soldier

friends, two of whom were recruited to the Socialist Workers League.

As the war was drawing to a close, he led a fight to block army efforts to recruit soldiers to lay and tamp tracklines between Toronto and Hamilton at army rates of pay instead of regular workers' wages. Ross led a protest at a railroad job site after refusing to carry out a direct order that would require him to work in isolation from the rest of the detail. As was his duty, he advised his second-in-command of his intended protest and the obligation he had to arrest Ross. Ross organized the resulting protest amongst the privates. On being arrested, he was escorted by two soldiers who paraded him back to camp to be confined to barracks. But, as agreed, the 45 men on the detail also fell in behind him. They were all confined to barracks with Ross, risking dishonorable discharge.

However, while on leave, Ross attended a weekend CCF picnic in Toronto, and told CCF leader M.J. Coldwell about the Army exploiting the army-paid soldiers as low-wage labor. Coldwell shortly afterwards denounced this practice in the House of Commons, and the King government was forced to immediately begin demobilization, and to start paying current wage rates to soldiers.

A few weeks later in December 1944, the brass bid Ross adieu as they discharged him from the army, releasing him once again to play the role of a dutiful private citizen.

### **PART 3 THE POST-WAR YEARS**

As the war neared its end, the Socialist Workers' League initiated efforts to regroup itself. In October 1944, the Socialist Workers League met in Montreal, electing Ross as its secretary pending his release from the army. In addition to attendance by fifteen members each from Toronto and Vancouver, representatives came from Niagara Falls, Prince Rupert, Ottawa, Montreal and several other areas including Saskatchewan. Plans were made for a new paper, this time a legal one, to start publishing in June 1945. The resistance to sacrifices for the war effort was growing as the conservatism of the working class was breaking up.

The post-war years also saw a dramatic growth in labor militancy with the return of young soldiers who had just risked their lives to fight for democracy who were not only expecting but demanding good jobs, adequate housing, and a decent standard of living. It was a time of heady struggles, which saw the unionization of the steel industry in Canada. (Labor historian Bryan Palmer quotes statistics that show that in 1946 to 1947, large strikes caused well over 7 million worker-days lost in Canada.)

In order to meet the new challenges and opportunities which had opened up, the

Canadian Trotskyists founded a new organization, the Revolutionary Workers' Party, and began moving out boldly in their own name. In Vancouver, two pioneers of the Canadian Communist Party, Max Armstrong and Malcolm Bruce, joined the Trotskyist movement at the war's end, contributing their talents and experiences in order to rebuild the movement based on the party that they had seen destroyed politically as a revolutionary force since the end of the 1920s – the Communist Party. They were joined by Reg and Ruth Bullock, who became the mainstay of the Revolutionary Workers' Party (RWP) and later the Socialist Information Centre as the Trotskyist movement became known in British Columbia, remaining as militants subsequently well into the seventies and their deaths in the eighties. The movement in British Columbia was well-implanted in the broad and influential left wing of the CCF and exercised considerable influence in some trade unions including the Woodworkers Union where Jean-Marie Bedard became the eastern Canadian head of the International Woodworkers of America (I.W.A.).

#### **D. The post-war resurgence**

Prominent leaders and members in Toronto included Ross' older brothers Murray and Hugh Dowson, his sisters Lois and Joyce, Joyce's husband Joe Rosenthal, and Ken Sutherland. Labour Challenge, as the RWP paper was then called, began publication as a biweekly eight-page newspaper with a circulation in the thousands. Members of the movement were active in the United Auto Workers, the Rubber Workers Union, the Teamsters and the needle trades.



In Toronto, Ross Dowson played a critical role in the post-war refoundation of the Revolutionary Workers Party. He assumed the position of executive secretary, edited the paper, ran for public office, and continued his lifelong avocation as a full-time revolutionist living a frugal life on the dues and pledges of the comrades. Although dedicating his life to party-building on a daily basis, Ross also found time to read the novels of James T. Farrell, Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck, to follow and study the design school of Bauhaus, the murals of Rivera, the history of Dadaism and to nurture his passionate interest in architecture about which he had fiercely held views and was a profession to which he himself had once aspired.

Though still only in his late 20s, Ross had already undergone serious training in the rigors of Marxist thought. Ross was not an abstract theoretician – for him each concept had to be in context and tied to a specific task. Then, he could exhibit brilliant insight. Ross had seen the leader of his co-thinkers in the United States, James P. Cannon, defend the political line of the movement against efforts in the late 1930s to dump its defense of the Soviet Union while at the same time against adapting to the pressure to support the war exerted by the Communist Party after the collapse of the Stalin-Hitler Pact with the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. He had developed an understanding of the importance of a political program that addressed the needs of the majority of the working class and that avoided the pitfalls of sectarianism or liquidation into whatever political current was fashionable on the reformist left at any particular time. Comrades came from far and wide to consult Ross on tactical questions and practical issues in their areas of work, always

leaving with a deeper understanding of what they could achieve.

In 1945 a Labour Party government was elected under Clement Atlee in England on a program which reflected the militancy of the British working class, including public ownership of the railways, mines and steel industry. The victory in Britain projected the possibility of workers in Canada also taking power through the CCF whose cross-country popularity had soared in the mid-war years.

True, the longevity of capitalism exceeded everyone's expectations. However, the Transitional Program expounded by Leon Trotsky and adopted as its program at the founding Congress of the Fourth International in 1938 in which the Canadian comrades maintained informal membership, was developed to project a series of demands to mobilize workers in struggles that would weaken the capitalist system while enhancing the unity and political understanding of the class as a whole. Under Ross Dowson the Revolutionary Workers Party became an effective exponent of such a program, giving it a unified focus by framing it within the need to take political power through independent working class political action by electing the CCF.

#### **E. The RWP moves out**

When the CCF did not live up to this challenge, the RWP moved out itself. One of the areas in which the CCF failed to provide a labor alternative was municipal politics. In the absence of CCF or labor candidates running in Toronto mayoralty campaigns, Ross filled the

bill, contesting the mayoralty to ensure that the class was not left without an alternative to capitalist politicians at the ballot box.

With an uncanny ability to reduce complex ideas to a few simple words and with the experience of visual communication that he had gained from his lithographic background, Ross churned out dozens of pamphlets and leaflets during this period, sustained the movement's weekly Friday evening public forums on topics of interest, edited its biweekly paper and oversaw its intervention in the CCF. In one of several election campaigns for mayor in Toronto, Ross published a brochure that was distributed to tens of thousands of homes. It showed a worker with his sleeves rolled up sweeping out two fat capitalists with dollar signs on their tuxedos from the corridors of City Hall. One out of every five Torontonians voted for Ross in that election causing the Globe and Mail, the staid spokesperson of Canada's bourgeois circles, in a front page editorial the day following the election, to vehemently excoriate the Toronto populace for voting in such numbers for a person with a subversive foreign ideology.

Throughout these heady times when the labor movement was flexing its muscles, Ross continued to play a multiplicity of roles. From the time that Labour Challenge proclaimed "There is no Peace" in its first post-war edition coinciding with Armistice Day in 1945 until the chill of the Cold War caused working class militancy to evaporate, Ross provided tactical guidance to the trade unions comrades in the movement. He edited and himself wrote a good part of Labour Challenge which he also helped distribute at factory

gates. He organized an educational program that included movie showings, panel discussions and public forums on the issues of the day. He enhanced the public face of the movement by professionally managing bookstores (one of which was described as operated by a proprietor who clearly “loved” books in a review published in a Toronto daily) that were stocked with all the critical writings of the revolutionaries as well as the great classics of literature, philosophy, art and science. He corresponded extensively with comrades across Canada and the world, he was a key activist and organizer in the Toronto branch and he applied himself diligently on a daily basis to “clipping the papers” so that key developments could be followed by over a period of time to prepare for editorial board discussions by assigned comrades so that events of the day could be followed in an informed way. A larger movement would, of course, have different comrades performing each of these roles. However, the Canadian movement unfortunately could not afford such luxury. Ross therefore stepped into play the role of theoretical leader, organizer, editor and agitator.

What was it about Ross that enabled him to fulfill so many roles? The answer involves a review of several of his personal attributes. First, Ross had a strong sense of what was objectively possible, an appreciation of the role that an individual could actually play in shaping forces that could affect history, and a strong sense of obligation and responsibility to fulfill this role. His political vision was shaped under the influence of Jack MacDonald, Maurice Spector and other giants of the Trotskyist movement who had dedicated their lives to free the working class. He was imbued with the same spirit of dedication and class solidarity that they had, a spirit of rolling up your sleeves and getting

the job done.

Second, Ross' commitment to socialism was concrete and action-oriented. He excelled in connecting the here and now to the future, what existed to what had to be done. Ross knew that, to walk a mile, you had to start with a first step. He saw the interconnectedness of all the steps as a continuum. Whatever adversities he faced, tactical solutions became evident to him. He was able to connect the dots. Even in the darkest days of the movement's existence, he was always able to see the future and work to realize it. As well, Ross experienced a genuine joy in his political life which gave him reason and purpose to exist. He never asked anyone to do anything he wasn't prepared to do himself. He told the comrades that they were the most important persons on earth. He had a great sense of the historical purpose and role of the working class about which he held no illusions and fulfilled his duty with a great sense of passion. Finally, he was imbued with a high level of energy and physical stamina, pacing himself for the end-run as he applied himself methodically to the task at hand.

#### **F. The dog days of the 1950s**

It was not long, however, before the international red scare, along with the massive buildup of nuclear weapons and the Cold War were launched by the United States and Britain. The Witch Hunt was first initiated in Canada in 1946 with the Gouzenko spy scandal and accelerated with the Iron Curtain speech by Churchill in England which marked the start of the Cold War, the buildup of nuclear weapons and the threat of nuclear annihilation.

This new climate isolated and weakened the movement once again. By the early 1950s, following the ebb of the labor upsurge, the red-baiting hysteria which resulted in McCarthyism in the United States had taken its toll on the Canadian movement as well, resulting in overwhelming state surveillance of legitimate activities of its members by the RCMP as part of its illicit “Operation Odd-job” and expulsions from the CCF.

Then suddenly, in 1953, the Fourth International itself split. One of its key European leaders, Michel Pablo, argued that, since the capitalist class was driving the world to a nuclear war, the Trotskyist movement did not have time for slow, educational work. It was urgently necessary to immediately covertly implant all of the movement’s meager forces into existing communist, socialist and labor parties with a perspective of replenishing forces and regrouping in open revolutionary struggle in time to prevent the impending third world war that threatened the survival of the human race. The majority in Canada under the leadership of Ross Dowson sided with the US Socialist Workers Party as well as other Trotskyist groups, mostly from the British Commonwealth, in opposing this perspective.

A serious, bitter and demoralizing rift split the Canadian movement as the Pabloite minority in Canada abandoned the RWL following a fierce debate. By 1952, the forces of Trotskyism had already been severely weakened by the intensification of the Cold War and the launching of the Korean War. With the CCF in a state of rapid decline, the RWL was reduced to a few adherents around Reg and Ruth Bullock in Vancouver and Ross Dowson in Toronto with a few “members-at-large” in between. The Vancouver comrades renamed

themselves the Socialist Information Centre (SIC) while the Toronto group identified themselves as the Socialist Educational League (SEL).

Both operated out of modest bookstores and adjacent halls, held public forums on a weekly basis, and sought to consolidate and educate the forces around them to raise their level of resistance to the pressures to abandon revolutionary politics. Although some of the comrades who embraced Pablo's position later maintained an antagonistic attitude toward the movement and refused to work with it in the future or completely abandoned politics, others returned to its ranks in the late fifties.

Although harassed and isolated, the SEL nevertheless managed to attract a small number of sophisticated and highly capable new cadres. Older comrades, including Ross's brothers, Murray and Hugh, and his sister Joyce, remained active in the Autoworkers, Rubber Workers, the Teamsters and the needle trade unions and helped Ross maintain the continuity of the movement and its politics. Meanwhile, newer, younger leaders were beginning to step in, including Ken Sutherland, Pat Schulz and Jim Mitchell who became the editor of the new journal Workers Vanguard in December 1955.

Comrades from the SEL intervened in the few struggles taking place during this era, notably the "Ban the Bomb" and the anti-nuclear shelter movement that began to gain momentum by the mid-to-late fifties. Under Ross's leadership, the SEL sought out every opportunity to replenish its meager forces. When the Communist Party fell apart in 1956 and 1957 following Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes, at the same

time as his brutal repression of the Hungarian Revolution, the SEL moved out aggressively in an unsuccessful attempt to win over dissidents who were leaving the Communist Party in droves.

#### **G. From revolutionist to revolutionary**

Ross' outstanding contribution during this time was his tenacity. He refused to abandon the lessons that he had learned with difficulty in favor of illusory shortcuts or panicky reactions. He brooked no opposition and refused to truck with those who were prepared to dump their traditions because the going was rough. The tougher the going, the more intolerant Ross became of those who wavered under pressure. It was during this period that, one can say, Ross turned from a revolutionist to a revolutionary, one who aspired to make a revolution to one who proved that he had the mettle to achieve one.

The survival of the movement was at stake. Heated discussions took place during this period of isolation. Outside of the anti-nuclear war movement and the defence of victims of state repression, there were few political arenas to intervene in to replenish the now thin ranks of the movement. All of this took place at a time of virulent anti-Communism during which the CCF itself declined as a meaningful political force and no longer offered a viable alternative to the capitalist parties nor effectively played the role of the voice of the labor movement in the corridors of power.

Just as Ross' tenacity kept the ideas of scientific socialism alive in the fight against



Pabloism, so also his tenacity kept the organization in Toronto alive during the nadir of its existence. Ross searched out every opportunity to build the movement. A caravan was organized to go to cities large and small across Canada, both east and west of Toronto, door to door to sell copies and renew subscriptions to Workers' Vanguard as the paper was then known and to keep in touch with contacts. These cross-country caravans were admittedly targeted by the RCMP Security Service which, on several occasions, interfered with its work including breaking into the vans that were used by the comrades to travel across the country and stealing subscription records and other material. Ross even encouraged the comrades to distribute literature at evangelical rallies at Maple Leaf Gardens pointing out that our ideas might be of interest to the thousands of young, impatient people who wanted salvation on earth now. Classes on Marxist economics and other topics were held regularly. Ross challenged the CCF leadership, when the party was in its death agony, to step aside from fielding a candidate in a provincial election to permit the Socialist Educational League to contest the seat in a riding where it had no chance of success. When the CCF refused, Ross ran as a candidate anyway in order to ensure that the voice of socialism would be clearly heard.

Young recruits such as Ernie Tate, Alan Harris, Cliff Orchard, Pat Brain and John Darling led several "Trailblazers tours" across the country at this time selling the Workers Vanguard at plant gates and subscriptions door-to-door and keeping in touch with political contacts from Sydney Nova Scotia to the Prairies, and to the Pacific Coast. In Toronto, a consistent campaign to sell copies of the American Trotskyist youth paper Young Socialist

at high schools recruited several rebel youth, including Harry Kopyto.

All of this took place at a time of virulent anti-Communism, and in which the CCF itself declined as a meaningful political force, no longer offering a viable alternative to the capitalist parties nor effectively representing the voice of the labor movement in the corridors of power. With the Party in rapid decline, Ross challenged the CCF leadership to step aside from fielding a candidate in a provincial election to allow the Socialist Educational League to contest a seat in a riding where the CCF had no chance of success. When the CCF brass refused, Ross ran as a candidate anyway in order to ensure that the voice of socialism would be heard.

## **DRAFT BIO FOR R.D. WEBSITE (unexpurgated)**

### **PART 4: THE YOUTH AND STUDENT RADICALIZATION**

In 1960, the international situation began to turn around. The Cuban Revolution and the struggle for equal rights by blacks in the United States began to frame a new era of political activity. In 1961, the CCF dissolved itself. The New Party, later to be known as the New Democratic Party, emerged from its shell and reconstituted itself with strong organic links to the labor movement. Ross foresaw the significance of the new party which grew in part out of the unification of

Canada's two main trade union federations in Canada. He himself attended the formal founding convention in Ottawa, supported the left-wing of the party under MP Hazen Argue that challenged the leadership on a left, anti-NATO program. On the other hand, Ross hailed elected leader Tommy Douglas' proclamation that the NDP would pose the need for socialism in the up-coming federal elections.

Under Ross's initiative, Canadian Trotskyists quickly responded to the new political situation. In 1961 they formally united, establishing the League for Socialist Action, to take advantage of the new openings offered by the foundation of the New Democratic Party and the unfolding colonial revolution. Shortly before, a youth section, the Young Socialists, was established by the younger comrades which was autonomous and independent, but in political solidarity with the LSA.

Sympathizers of the movement were encouraged to establish and lead the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC) in which the League played the critical role in defense of the Cuban Revolution. This organization held demonstrations, raised funds, organized speaking tours, held banquets and organized tours to Cuba, while distributing by the tens of thousands Castro's *Second Declaration of Havana* outlining the socialist nature of the Cuban Revolution, along with the LSA's other pamphlets and newsletters on the Cuban Revolution.

Comrades not only joined the NDP but were encouraged to play an active in

riding association executives and, in some cases, worked as election campaign organizers. New young members were being attracted to join the Young Socialists one by one, often recruited from the New Democratic Youth (NDY), playing a decisive role in the movement's growth. The publication frequency of the *Workers' Vanguard* was increased, as was its circulation. During this time, comrades played critical roles in several union struggles including the Teamsters Union Local 938 which, under the leadership of a caucus initiated by the LSA closed down the trucking industry in Ontario for an entire month in 1962, and published militant caucus bulletins over a three-year period.

As the League's forces grew in the NDY and were posed to win the organization to a pro-Cuban and anti-NATO line, in 1963, 14 youth comrades along with Peter Woodsworth, a grandnephew of the CCF's founder and leader, were expelled from the New Democratic Party, adding significantly to the forces available to play "open" roles in the League for Socialist Action and the Young Socialists. This marked a dramatic growth in its public presence. In fact, a broad aggressive campaign was held within the NDP and NDY against the expulsions which included a pamphlet and speaking tour which resulted in new forces joining the Young Socialists. As the movement against the war in Vietnam began to coalesce along with the student power movement in 1964, the forces of the movement doubled in size in a short period of time as it aggressively recruited a new layer of young activists as well as some seasoned militant trade unionists. The Young Socialists established its own

headquarters at 32 Cecil Street in Toronto, published an attractive monthly magazine, *Young Socialist Forum*, formed the backbone of the campus-based committees to end the war in Vietnam, established high school contingents and played central roles in the emerging movements for women's liberation, defense of the colonial revolution and solidarity with the black struggle in the southern United States.

#### **H.     Burgeoning growth and independent activity**

To facilitate the discussion of its work and accommodate its larger membership, the Toronto branch was subdivided into three locals, one east, one west, and one in north Toronto, which met on alternate weeks. By 1965, most of the comrades in the movement assumed more modest positions on the NDP riding executives while at the same time moving out aggressively into the public eye and establishing several branches and locals of the League and Young Socialists in cities across Canada from Black's Harbour, New Brunswick to Victoria B.C. Comrades were sent across the country to "colonize" new locals in Winnipeg, Waterloo, London, Hamilton, Ottawa, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Kingston and several other cities. Young Socialists contested student elections and were elected to the presidencies of Simon Fraser University and York University's student councils.

The sudden new growth of the Canadian Trotskyist movement and its increased public profile coincided with a decline of militancy and opportunities within the NDP by the mid-1960s. The NDP remained as always the focus of the LSA's

politics, but the Trotskyist movement began to increasingly centre its day-to-day activities on the developing mass movements that were emerging largely outside the NDP.

The latter half of the 1960s witnessed an even more dramatic growth in the forces of the Canadian Trotskyist movement which eventually consisted of some 350 to 400 adherents across the country. These comrades managed to exert a political influence far beyond what their numbers would ordinarily warrant. Between the YS and LSA local and federal offices in Toronto, a dozen comrades worked full-time for the movement during this period. Comrades were sent across the country to "colonize" new locals in Winnipeg, Waterloo, London, Hamilton, Ottawa, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Kingston and several other cities. Young Socialists contested student elections and were elected to the presidencies of Simon Fraser University and York University's student councils.

#### **I. Ross internationalist to the core**

During this time, Ross, an internationalist to the core, encouraged numerous comrades who had moved to Canada from elsewhere to return to their countries. Ernie Tate and Pat Brain moved to London, England to work side by side with Bertrand Russell in the International War Crimes Tribunal set up to investigate U.S. war crimes; a medical doctor comrade, Gus Tolentino, went to Vietnam to investigate the effect of anti-personnel weapons, bombs used by the U.S. Keith Locke became

the spokesperson for the movement to oppose nuclear arms after he returned to New Zealand and other comrades returned to or went to Scotland, Mexico, Australia and the United States.

It was during this time too that Camp Poundmaker was founded. A summer camp built on a few acres of rocky terrain north of Deseronto and mid-way between Toronto and Montreal, the Camp was named after a Native leader who sought unity in the struggle for native rights. From the Victoria Day weekend when a fireworks display was the main attraction to Thanksgiving Day when homemade honey ham, roast turkey and pumpkin pie were the feature, the Camp became a centre for educational, discussions, meetings and conferences and just plain fun. Ross led dozens of young comrades on mushroom-hunting expeditions. Hundreds of comrades over the years spent weeks, weekends and sometimes whole summers at the camp playing games at the large lodge built by the comrades themselves and sleeping over in tiny cabins scattered throughout the grounds. In addition, half a dozen summer homes were built on the campgrounds by older comrades who chose to stay there during the summer or who visited on weekends. Bonfires, sing-songs and intense political discussions all melded into a common stream at the Camp. Ross was instrumental in buying and maintaining the camp. Ross believed that the movement should be able to accommodate all the needs of the comrades.

Ross never married - such a commitment would have diverted him from the



main aim of his life. But while Ross was a Bolshevik to his core and a party builder par excellence, he lived his life fully. He loved and cared for his family deeply. He compensated for not having children by enjoying the children around the movement and his family. His favorite gifts to children were books that would open their eyes to the classic works of verse and prose of humanity. His favorite gifts to adults were works of art that resonated with meaning and significance to them in their lives. He played the role of a loving uncle to the son and three daughters of his brother, Hugh, who died prematurely from a heart attack, encouraging them to take risks, live their lives fully and struggle to realize their goals.

#### **J. On the professional psyche**

Ross always had 50 cent lunches of jam, peanut butter, bread and drinks available at the back hall of the bookstores where forums were held and everyone was invited. The back halls usually also accommodate meeting rooms, a fridge, libraries and duplicators, sometimes even a Multilith press to print the papers and pamphlets. Throughout this period, as well as throughout his life, Ross collected works of art from around the world especially sculptures which he loved, developed his extensive personal library, subscribed to *Scientific American*, decorated the walls of his tiny apartment in downtown Toronto with pictures of far-off universes and exploding galaxies, collected art books and prints of his favorite artists' pictures, listened to music (Bob Dylan and Barbara Streisand were among his favorites during their heyday) and maintained active contact with several poets (Al Purdy, Milton

Acorn and Joe Rosenblatt and others dropped in regularly to see him). He refused to travel to the Third World because of the starkness of the poverty he would have to face. Ross was also a good partygoer, breaking into spontaneous song or imitating a singer in an exaggerated fashion. He was a smooth, assured dancer. He loved a good joke and was very much, one of the guys. He sometimes adopted an exaggerated style to make a point. When some difficult task was at hand, he would sometimes sweep his hand forward while bowing and say, "After you, Alphonse." His lifestyle was typically working class in most respects. He described himself humorously as having become a profiteer when he wrote in a letter to his mother that he was receiving \$3.00 a day as his army pay. Although Ross used to say that a daily revolutionary paper should have a sports page, he was aghast at the waste of effort some workers exerted in memorizing sports scores. He promoted women to leading positions in the movement well before feminism was current. Pat Schulz, who later became a highly respected feminist, was the Toronto organizer in the early 1960's. Ross did unexpected things in his writing, such as using the phrase "Women and men..." instead of "Men and women..." as his literary contribution to consciousness-raising. He would never edit for style, wrote in a dense style that reflected the interconnectedness of his thoughts that has variously been described as convoluted or "muscular" (Ernest Mandel) and vigorously opposed having the movement take positions on life style questions. He did however encourage comrades to adopt the life style of working people. Ross only started watching TV late in life. Aside from news, he preferred public television and Television Ontario.

He allowed himself few indulgences in food, believing that true cuisine would flower under socialism but he did love a sip of Advocaat and an occasional Ferrera-Rocher, waxing ecstatic over such delicacies.

Ross made no effort to restrict the growth of the movement or the integration of the new comrades into its leadership. He welcomed the new forces with open hands. He respected the autonomy of the youth movement and its right to make its own decisions whether he agreed with them or not. Comrades, however, had to be prepared to defend their positions when Ross was involved in the discussion. His impeccable logic, his insistence on disciplined thought with emphasis on the importance of implementing decisions once they were agreed on was evident to all who had contact with him. Heated debate within the editorial board of the *Workers' Vanguard* and later *Labour Challenge* were not unknown during this period of time. Comrades were expected to fulfill the norms of membership which involved both internal responsibility as well as participation in an outside area of work in order to fulfill their obligations of membership. Interestingly, some of the practices that the movement had developed over time including security concerns that were no longer necessary such as the use of pseudonyms to protect the identity of the comrades in the record of the minutes of the Leagues' meetings reflected habits that were shaped by another era.

In some respects, the very strengths that Ross had exhibited which ensured

the survival of the movement in leaner times such as a propensity to substitute himself for others when a job had to be done, skepticism directed to the movement's dissidents and a tendency to be irascible and confrontational, were no longer productive in the context of a growing movement. While Ross was a good educator encouraging comrades to read the Marxist classics even helping them extensively in their own areas of interest to a remarkable extent and promoted them to positions of responsibility and leadership, he could be passionate, even explosive, when he perceived his opponents were not serious or open to reconsider their positions. But such emotion was not a product of inflexible thinking or a dogmatic approach. On the contrary, Ross' thinking was flexible and remarkably intuitive. The Three Mile Island nuclear catastrophe and the carnage caused by the meltdown of the Ukrainian nuclear reactor in Chernobyl caused him to rethink and then totally abandon his previously held position in favor of the development of nuclear power facilities. He debated vehemently in the 1960s against those who, like Barry Lord, editor of Arts Canada, advocated a political line on questions of art. Even in his evaluation of individuals, he was able to reconsider his opinions, often implicitly admitting his initial failure to appreciate a comrade's talents or his overestimation of another's abilities.

The latter half of the 1960s continued the dramatic growth in the forces of the Trotskyist movement which by the late 1960s soon amassed 350 adherents, who exerted a political influence much larger than such numbers would ordinarily warrant.

With the NDP on the sidelines, the movement established a high profile and saw dramatic growth. The Young Socialists rented a house on 32 Cecil Street close to the University of Toronto campus. There were plays, dances, parties, forums, conferences and a plethora of other events in addition to weekly meetings of the Toronto local each Saturday. Between the YS and LSA local and federal offices, a dozen comrades worked full-time for the movement in Toronto during this period.

In Quebec, the four comrades sent there in 1964 to “colonize” the Province soon became the core of a francophone movement known as the Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière / Ligue des Jeune Socialistes (LSO/LJS) that soon numbered one hundred. With Ross’ insight, the LSO recognized the centrality of the fight for the defence of the French language in Quebec as the language of instruction in the schools and the language at work and immediately supported legislation to that effect. The LSO’s clarity on this question gave it strong credibility in the nationalist movement. Some of the highlights of the growth of the movement in this period included the recruitment of several dozen francophone student activists in the radical wing of the nationalist movement during the strike led by l’Union Général des Étudiants de Québec in 1969, including several presidents of CEGEPs (Community Colleges) in the Montreal area.

In 1968, the League presented a brief to the federal government’s Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1968. Later published as an influential

pamphlet, it outlined many of the critical demands and issues that were adopted by the women's movement in Canada and provided direction for its future growth. Ross oversaw the development as well of a clear and rounded analysis of the Native question in Canada and advocacy of Red Power and self-determination for indigenous peoples; and the emergence of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee as the key defender of the Cuban Revolution in Canada during its critical first decade. He also participated in developing a program to democratize the universities and high schools, advocating the implementation of student, faculty support staff control of these institutions.

One of Ross's most significant contributions during this period was to inspire the L.S.A. to assume the leadership role in the anti-war movement in Canada. In a hotly fought contest, Ross in fact helped establish the central political demands of this movement, above all the demand "End Canada's Complicity" a formulation he had himself developed. Advancing the slogan "Withdraw U.S. troops Now" as opposed to the Communist Party's demand to end the bombing and for a negotiated settlement, as well as against the slogan "Victory to the Viet Cong" promoted by ultra-left forces, comrades from the LSA and Young Socialists organized and led the campus and high school committees to end the war in Vietnam and were instrumental in all the main coalitions that organized the protests and demonstrations against the war in that era . No one active in the left during this time could avoid knowing of the Trotskyist

movement and having to take a position in relation to it. It sometimes felt that the league was in a constant state of mobilization during that time and its influence far exceeded one would assume a hundred comrades would ordinarily obtain. This fact was well appreciated by the RCMP Security Service which amassed a dossier on Ross that exceeded two thousand pages in one surveillance bank alone.

#### **K. Three outstanding political developments**

There were **three** outstanding political developments that took place during the height of the radicalization in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ross played a critical role in developing a cogent analysis and in orienting the Trotskyist movement in its intervention in each case.

The **first** event involved the momentous rise of a spirit of nationalism in Quebec. The nationalist movement was directed against the central Canadian federal state. Along with other comrades, Ross applied himself to analyzing the nature of this nationalist current and its political significance. As always, he tried to understand the essence of the phenomenon and what it signified. Ross' analysis showed that the nationalist mood that had characterized the previous period of Quebec history had been essentially petit-bourgeois in nature and reflected the

desires of young educated elements of the Quebec society to compete effectively in French with anglophones in Quebec for available jobs. This proletarian thrust to Québécois nationalism was centered around the demand for the primacy of the French language. The Ligue socialiste ouvrière was prominent in its demand for French unilingualism and in support of French-only schools for allophone immigrant children. Hundreds of copies of the LSO tabloid *Libération* were sold at rallies and demonstrations (as the earlier mimeo then printed publication *La lutte ouvrière* had been since the mid-1960s). This nationalist mood had by the 1960s infused itself into the ranks of the working class as a whole. Further, the nationalist movement reflected the collective yearnings of the Québécois for an independent state.

The LSA/LSO during this time intervened in the nationalist milieu with a program that promoted a socialist vision of an independent Quebec state. This orientation expressed, in the concept “For an Independent and Socialist Quebec,” enabled the Quebec comrades to increase their credibility, influence and numbers quickly so that branches of the League socialiste ouvrière were soon established throughout Quebec’s major urban centres. At the same time, the absence of a labor party in Quebec, largely as a result of the default of the NDP in recognizing the right of the Québécois to determine their own future and in not identifying with their *indépendantiste* sentiment, constituted an impasse to creating a unified nationalist movement that was clearly socialist in character. Hence, the Québécois working class expressed its nationalist aspirations through the petit-bourgeois Parti Québécois.



While the LSA advocated the right of self-determination for Quebec in the rest of Canada, the Ligue socialiste ouvrière implanted itself as a significant force in the left wing of the Quebec nationalist movement. It was therefore no accident when the mayoralty candidate of the LSO in Montreal was rounded up and jailed on October 15, 1970 when Prime Minister Trudeau proclaimed the War Measures Act in an effort to smash the nationalist movement.

Meanwhile, in English Canada, a **second** radical development had begun to take shape by the early 1960s. Spurred in large part by the expansion of the U.S. war of aggression against the people of Vietnam, a strong anti-imperialist sentiment developed throughout Canadian society. In late 1971, a largely spontaneous protest broke out against the testing of a nuclear bomb in Amchitka, Alaska by the U.S. Government, an act widely perceived as threatening to Canada's environment and escalating the Vietnam war. One million Canadians, including hundreds of thousands of students took to the streets demonstrating in front of U.S. embassies from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island on the day that the tests took place. Such a manifestation was unprecedented in Canadian history. What was one to make of it? In attempting to assess its political significance, Ross took note that the common feature of the demonstrations was an absence of developed political demands. Instead, those who attended the largest demonstrations in Canadian history sang "Oh Canada", Canada's archaic national anthem. What were revolutionary Marxists to make of this profound outpouring of nationalist sentiment and anger?

Ross immediately realized the significance of the event in the following days and weeks. Ross had only two years earlier dedicated himself to analyzing the unique nature of Canada-U.S. relations. Along with Dick Fidler, who edited the new LSA publication *Labour Challenge*, he had concluded that, as a result of the geographical juxtaposition of Canada next to the most powerful capitalist state in the world, the Canadian bourgeoisie was among the weakest of any country in existence, that the United States capitalist class dominated virtually every significant sector of the Canadian economy and that the Canadian ruling class constituted junior partners of US imperialism. This analysis had already been endorsed by a wide majority at the LSA's 1968 convention, including almost its entire central leadership, and was widely circulated in a pamphlet published in 1969 entitled "Canada-US Relations."

Now, following the Amchitka protests, Ross characterized this rising Canadian nationalist sentiment, which included a burgeoning movement for autonomy within Canada's trade unions, as an elemental anti-imperialist sentiment. Rather than reflecting the staid nationalism of the Canadian bourgeoisie, this new nationalist sentiment, he maintained, was in fact challenging the capitalist status quo. This analysis was embraced by the LSA which began carrying more and more articles in its press on this issue.

In adopting this analysis, the movement's approach was compared to Trotsky's analysis of the nationalist sentiment among the Catalonians against the central

Spanish state in the 1930s, which Trotsky had characterized as "the envelope of their social indignation."

Ross thus applied the movement's earlier economic analysis to the Amchitka protests, drawing from such analysis the political and programmatic lessons to be learned. Such analysis went contrary to a dogmatic interpretation of orthodox Marxism in which nationalism in an advanced capitalist country was perceived to be necessarily reactionary. However, Ross quickly convinced the rest of the comrades to follow his lead in framing the transitional demands in the context of Canadian nationalism.

The validity of this analysis had already become apparent in yet a **third** significant development. From the mid-60s until the close of the 1960s, the N.D.P. had remained on the political sidelines during the period of the burgeoning movements against the war in Vietnam, for student power and for women to control their bodies that reflected the international student and youth radicalization. Nevertheless, throughout this time, the LSA continued to make the NDP the focus of its politics, seeking to educate its new young recruits and the left in general on the centrality of the NDP as Canada's labor party, and the need to win it to the role of an anti-war, pro-feminist, pro-student party.

Sensing an opportunity to make the Party relevant again, NDP Leader David

Lewis suddenly steered the Party to the left, explicitly identifying with the anti-war movement, attacking US imperialism by name at a rally of 10,000 to protest the war in Vietnam that took place in Ottawa in 1970. One year later, the NDP stood alone in opposing the War Measures Act and shortly thereafter, running a federal election campaign in which a high profile attack on “corporate welfare bums” became the NDP’s major theme. The NDP was becoming prominent again.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, in a very short period of time, the nationalist sentiment intersected with the Ontario NDP and labor movement and resulted in the formation of the Waffle group within the party in Ontario and soon afterwards in BC, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the Maritimes. Calling for massive public ownership of Canada’s industries and financial institutions, the Waffle’s program gained wide appeal and support throughout the party, initially (at least verbally) even from some of its leadership. Thus, as an amalgam of trade unionists, economic nationalists and anti-war activists and academics headed by Professors Mel Watkins and Jim Laxer, the Waffle infused the NDP with radical demands framed within a nationalist context.

During this time, demands for public ownership of runaway plants, preservation of Canadian social programs and services, against erosion on the US model, explicit opposition to Canada’s role as handmaiden to the United States war machine, demands for autonomy and democracy in the US-dominated international unions and demands to quit the North American Treaty Organization (NATO)

suddenly became commonplace, being posed by Waffle debated throughout the NDP right across the country.

Finally, In a confrontation with the NDP brass and union tops which took place in Orillia, Ontario in 1972 attended by more than 700 delegates and observers from the ONDP, the majority of the delegates at the Provincial Council meeting passed a resolution calling on the Waffle to disband because it was allegedly becoming a “party within a party”. 40% of the delegates, however, defended the Waffle. League members who had been active in the Waffle organized a stay-and-fight campaign. However, a majority of Wafflers chose to leave the NDP to found the Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada, or MISC. As it turned out, the new organization soon fizzled away as it became quickly isolated from the labor movement and its centre of politics in the NDP. Still, as a left nationalist current, the Waffle had embraced socialism and succeeded in forming the largest-ever opposition within the NDP, and since.

#### **F. Ross in Europe (1963)**

There was another significant achievement that Ross made in the 1960s. In 1963, along with Joe Hanson, central leader of the U.S. Socialist Workers’ Party who had served as Trotsky’s bodyguard in Mexico City during his exile there in the 1930s, Ross left Canada for Europe in 1963. Their purpose was to attempt to reunify the forces of world Trotskyism, which had been divided for a decade following the split

with Michel Pablo. The need for unity was urgent. The Pabloite line was proven wrong. A new radicalization was presenting opportunities that only a unified international could take advantage of. Following conferences with Pierre Frank from France, Livio Maitan from Italy and Ernest Mandel from Belgium, all formerly key supporters of Pablo and the most important leaders of the Fourth International in Europe, a decision to reunify the forces of world Trotskyism was made. The Reunification Congress took place that same year; Ross was elected to the United Secretariat; and the various sections of the Fourth International became better poised to play central roles in the 1960's radicalization across the globe. In various countries as youth looking to break from both Stalinism and reformism during that time, turned to a unified Fourth International as a pole of attraction.

As Ross began his work in Europe with the Fourth International at its headquarters in France, he became ill at ease with the structural forms of organization on that continent. His method of operation differed significantly from that of the European comrades. The Canadian movement was organized on the British model, with comrades active in the branches where they lived, meeting weekly and doing fraction work in their same area of political work. The European comrades tended to organize provisionally as "cellules" in their work areas, holding membership meetings in their metropolitan areas less frequently. This gave European organizations a looseness and lack of cohesion in the way they worked without the same geographical rootedness the movement had in Canada.

Recognizing his talents and abilities, the comrades of the United Secretariat asked Ross to help develop the program for the Algerian Revolution then underway, in which Michel Pablo was playing an influential role. Ross objected to this assignment complaining that the program should be worked out by the Algerian comrades who were most familiar with the situation. He did not feel comfortable playing the role of a mentor parachuted into an area he was unfamiliar with, and felt that he was being substituted for the forces on the ground. He argued that the Fourth International had to be based on strong and rooted national sections, not directed from outside.

Instead, Ross returned to Canada a few months later, where he helped popularize the Tripoli Program which was eventually adopted as a result of the work of the Algerian comrades themselves. The LSA sent comrades to Algeria to study, who organized tours in its defence, and distributed thousands of copies of the Tripoli Program throughout the country and elsewhere. This was the way Ross felt that the Canadian comrades could best help defend the Algerian Revolution.

However, despite this solidarity in Canada and elsewhere, the Algerian Revolution led by Ben Bella was soon to suffer a major setback as a result of the machinations of French imperialism which ousted Ben Bella to replace him with

their neo-colonial henchman. Still, this experience showed Ross' belief that revolutionary cadres should be implanted in the conditions of their own country and class. He believed that two or three thousand revolutionists rooted in the key factories and plants of Canada would be all that was needed to lead a revolution. He thought Lenin would have scoffed at the thought that a Communist Party such as in France could have more than a million members without a revolution taking place. As long as the comrades had to be established leaders in all the important existing organizations of their class they could lead struggles when the capitalist system shocked them into revolutionary struggle. He often reminded comrades that the organizations of the working class, both political parties and trade unions, were already structured. Revolutionists had to function within these structures in order to amass the forces necessary to win adherents to their program.

#### **M. An ill-fated transfer of leadership**

As the 1960s drew to a close, and as new and vital forces continued to be drawn into the movement, Ross decided to transfer the leadership of the LSA completely over to the younger layer of leading cadre who had emerged over the previous decade. Ross eventually resigned his position as executive secretary in 1972, nominating in his place John Riddell, a former youth activist who had joined the movement in 1960.



In 1970, Ross headed to Europe to again work with the Fourth International at its headquarters in France. However, he soon began to feel apprehensive about the course the Canadian movement was taking. While in Europe, Ross continued to closely follow *Labor Challenge* and the *Young Socialist* and to correspond with comrades in Canada. He soon became alarmed at the direction the Canadian movement appeared to be taking, notably what he felt was an increasing abandonment of critical and principled politics in its press. Ross returned to Canada within a year or having left.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the LSA and Young Socialists, which had previously recruited members in Toronto one by one and occasionally in twos or threes suddenly found itself the object of interest of organized entire groups of radical youth who were joining the movement. In Toronto, two groups -- the Old Mole and the Red Circle -- had evolved from the New Left, as the anti-Stalinist left became known, to Marxism and Leninism, although their Leninism was of a form alien to the League. Believing that the League had an obligation to open its doors to all radicalizing forces rather than maintain sectarian purity in solitary isolation, two dozen or so members were admitted to the movement in Toronto following limited discussions and without undergoing common experiences, suddenly enlarging the League in a way that had not been previously foreseen.

However, the new comrades were mainly students or academics who had

little or no experience in working class organizations, including the NDP. In Ross's view, they lacked any rootedness in the traditions and history of the working class, let alone of the Trotskyist movement. He felt they reflected the spirit of impatience that characterized the ultra-leftism that was widespread within the youth radicalization at the time, crescendoing in the upheavals in France in 1968-69.

Then, to Ross's dismay, the principle of unconditional but critical support for Canada's labor party that had been the major component and orientation of Canadian Trotskyism for decades was steadily being challenged by the new majority in the LSA. Instead, the LSA was soon promoting a position of "conditional" support for the NDP and its provincial governments in its press.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the fact that the new leadership under Riddell had embraced Ross's analysis of Canadian economy and that of the emerging Canadian nationalist anti-imperialist sentiment, this same leadership unexpectedly took their distance from this analysis. Instead they adopted the view that they themselves had rejected back in 1968: namely, that Canada was a major imperialist power and that Canadian nationalism was therefore by definition bourgeois and reactionary. Overnight, the Riddell leadership had adapted to the ultra-leftists both within and outside its ranks, and which had from the outset opposed and sought to undermine the LSA's longstanding orientation to the NDP and had attacked its position on Canadian nationalism. This opposition was centered in the Old Mole and

Red Circle, now both combined and renamed the Revolutionary Communist Tendency (RCT) -- reneging on the fundamental lessons of 40 years of experience or orientation to the CCF-NDP. Ross suddenly found himself a political stranger in the movement that he had built over several decades.

#### **N. Factional debates and split**

The discussion that took place in the movement during the pre-convention period in 1971 and 1972 that was to deal with these issues became embittered beyond imagination. At the same time, Ernest Mandel, the theoretical leader of the Fourth International, which itself had adopted at its 1969 World Congress an ultra-left position that declared guerrilla warfare as the central strategy for the entire continent of Latin America, entered the fray. Mandel attacked Ross for what he called "tailing" the reformism of the NDP, as well as Canadian "bourgeois nationalism," even though he himself later used the term "imperialized imperialism" to describe countries like Canada that shared features of imperialist and colonized countries simultaneously. Mandel's comments gave the green light to the new opposition within the League and placed added pressure on the Riddell leadership to adapt to their views. In a short while Ross Dowson and his supporters -- mostly older comrades in the movement -- found themselves increasingly isolated in the movement Ross had led and built over several decades.

Ross made every effort possible to participate in the discussion that ensued

and that was supposed to be taking place in the movement in an organized way, by writing several major internal documents in this period both polemical and dealing with economic analyses of the Canadian economy. Along with Ross' supporters, the Labor Party Tendency (LPT) was formed within the LSA to facilitate the discussion. However, the acrimony of the discussion would not permit a meaningful exchange of views. Ross and his comrades in the Tendency were faced with a painful decision -- to remain in an organization which had jettisoned the longstanding traditions of the movement, or to leave in order to preserve those traditions, and thereby in so doing, be excluded from the Fourth International. In 1974, the members of the Labor Party Tendency made a decision: they withdrew from the LSA entirely.

Ironically for Ross, the majority of his supporters in the new group had been dissidents and critics in the movement who he had not previously appreciated as cadres.

## **PART 5 - AGAINST THE STREAM**

Ross had always understood that the construction of a revolutionary party did not follow a smooth trajectory. His 39-year experience at this stage rather confirmed the cycle of short periods of rapid expansion and long periods of isolation, swimming against the current.

It would have been a mistake to insulate the movement from the influx of

the new forces. A movement worth its salt had to be with the class, go through its experience and rise and fall with it. There was no one to blame, just a time to think things through.

As for the organization that he had a large part in building over 13 years, shortly after leaving the League for Socialist Action, it soon renamed itself the Revolutionary Workers' League and disintegrated into various sectarian components, each fiercely attacking each other. The decision to leave in retrospect was a wise one as it avoided entanglement in a group that was widely described as a "zoo" -- in reality, the product of a politically unprincipled fusion.

Ross decided to take a break for the better part of half a year at Camp Poundmaker, the summer camp that had been founded by the movement during its heyday. Wearing a beekeeper's hat and protective rubber overalls, he ventured into the mosquito-infested rocky terrain to plant hundreds of trees. He breathed the country air and came as close to relaxing as his active mind would let him. It was a period of self-exile for Ross and it gave him an opportunity to consider and reflect on the future course of the movement.

Although Ross had seen the legacy of the movement destroyed within the LSA and although the comrades of the Socialist League were now more isolated, he didn't lose hope or confidence. Instead, he encouraged the comrades to turn

outward and to renew contact with the working class and its political party, the NDP.

And then, Ross was back in Toronto, as suddenly as he left. Very shortly after his return, he worked briefly at various jobs including at a bookstore. Although assured his position was not managerial, his employer asked Ross to fire a worker. He immediately quit his job and went back to being a full-time revolutionist. A new organization, the Socialist League, was formed to maintain continuity with the traditions of the League for Socialist Action. Thirty-five members were present at the first meeting of the Socialist League, which held regular weekly public forums and published the monthly journal Forward, with offices and a hall behind a bookstore at 83 Gerrard Street East, expanding later at 121 Church Street in Toronto, until the bookstore was forced to close a few years later.

In addition to their internal responsibilities, the members applied themselves externally to playing roles in various areas including the provincial NDP riding associations. Through the Left Caucus of the NDP, the League played a critical role at the federal NDP convention in 1973 in Regina, almost succeeding in winning the party over to endorsing a Socialist Manifesto to commemorate 50 years since the proclamation of the Regina Manifesto. Comrades intervened frequently and actively in the areas of social protest including the labor movement.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, the comrades of the Socialist

League, which was renamed the Forward Group in 1978, sustained the ONDP Left Caucus as a large and influential force in an uneasy alliance with other left forces. The Left Caucus played a critical role at several provincial and federal conventions, including drafting and arguing for left-wing resolutions and providing an organized forum for the expression of socialist ideas within the NDP.

#### **O. In defense of Polish Solidarnosc**

Following the declaration of martial law in Poland in December 1981, the Forward Group was the only organization on the radical left to unequivocally defend the Solidarnosc movement. Three months earlier, at the height of the Polish union movement's strength, a special exclusive edition of Forward was published containing the entire program of Solidarnosc. The program called for the socialization of the means of production, the democratization of the bureaucratically degenerated Polish economy and its total reconstitution along lines of autonomous self-administration by the working class. Ross personally distributed thousands of copies of the issue in the west end of Toronto where the Polish population was concentrated in an effort to popularize the radical, pro-socialist platform of Solidarnosc. *Forward* came to its defense when its leadership was arrested on December 13, 1981. In addition, comrades under Ross' leadership were instrumental in organizing a Committee to stop the Show Trials by sending monitors to Poland to report on the trials of the leaders of Solidarnosc who were charged by the Stalinist bureaucracy. This was one of many other efforts made under Ross' initiative to

defend what he considered to be the most significant workers uprising against Stalinism since the Hungarian revolution in 1956 and the 1969 upheaval in Czechoslovakia.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, the comrades of the Socialist League, eventually renamed the Forward Group, continued to play the key role in maintaining the Left Caucus in Ontario as a force within the Party. In particular, the comrades were active in politics around the Metropolitan Toronto Area Committee of the NDP (MTAC). During this time, the municipal arena attracted a large number of NDP activists. The comrades of the Forward Group sustained this area of work, played a leading role in NDP municipal conferences, promoted NDPers to run for mayor and participated actively in ward organizations. Further, the Forward Group sustained the left caucus as a large and influential force in the NDP in an uneasy alliance with other left forces in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Left Caucus played a critical role at several provincial and federal conventions, including drafting and arguing for, left wing resolutions, holding debates and discussions on the issues facing the Party and providing an organized forum for the expression of socialist ideas within the NDP.

The comrades in the Forward Group were also active in the NDP Committee for the Preservation of Public Education, a formation which worked closely with teachers unions to support a unified public school system and to stop public funding



of religious education. This important campaign won widespread support within and outside the NDP, with Gord Doctorow highlighting the issue in his campaign as an NDP candidate in Metro Toronto.

#### **P. Popularizing the Constituent Assembly**

It was also in the early 1980s during the constitutional crisis surrounding the repatriation of Canada's constitution that Ross took the bold and unique initiative among the revolutionary Canadian left of advocating and popularizing the call to convene a Constituent Assembly. In a Forward Group pamphlet widely distributed widely within the NDP and on the left, Ross called for a broad discussion within the trade unions, professional organizations and other institutions of civil society. Delegates would be selected to attend a central conference to debate the issues of today. All questions would be up for discussion -- the right of Native Peoples and Québécois for self-determination; collective and social rights such as the right to a job and a safe work environment, the right of women to control their bodies, the right to free education and free healthcare. The delegates would then return to their communities where discussion would take place and a vote would be held to determine what a new Canada would look like. This perspective resonated during the campaign for a "No" vote on the Constitution, as leading intellectuals around the *Canadian Forum* magazine and other forces embraced a similar perspective.

#### **D. Dowson vs. the RCMP**

Perhaps the best-known contribution that Ross personally made during this period was his campaign to expose the crimes of the RCMP directed against the League for Socialist Action as well as other legitimate organizations. On November 1, 1977, following revelations in the Ontario Legislature that the RCMP had interfered in the Waffle wing of the Ontario NDP because of alleged infiltration by the LSA and "ex-Communists," Ross launched a slander suit in Federal Court, claiming damages.

The Socialist Rights Defence Fund was organized to support the suit, and received wide support, including from Noam Chomsky, Linus Pauling, Jessica Mitford and notable Canadians such as Grace Hartman, Margaret Lawrence and Pierre Berton. Despite such broad support as well as endorsement of the civil action by major labor councils and by the federal NDP, the RCMP stymied the lawsuit -- until it was finally forced by public pressure and embarrassment to admit that it had authorized the forging, uttering and circulating of false documents within the LSA and YS, which was criminal conduct on its part.

With legal counsel provided by noted Toronto civil rights lawyer Harry Kopyto, the litigation which Ross started reached the Supreme Court of Canada on two occasions. On one of those occasions it resulted in a precedent-setting case affirming the historic right of private prosecution. But we were never able to achieve a hearing against the RCMP Security Service on the merits of our case against them.

Nonetheless, Ross's decades-long campaign against RCMP harassment was the most systematic and effective intervention carried out by any left force in Canada. In fact, the *Toronto Globe and Mail* described Ross's contribution as being "instrumental" in replacing the RCMP Security Service with a civilian review force in the late 1908s.

Although the Forward Group shrank in numbers as did all other groups in the 1980s, Ross continued to struggle to keep alive the ideas that motivated him from the time of his youth. While no longer affiliated formally with the Fourth International, Ross and the comrades of the Forward Group continued to identify with the world Trotskyist movement, circulating its publications and documents, defending its program and its principles, and contributing to it financially.

Ross always held to the perspective that Canadian Trotskyists would eventually come together and reconstitute themselves in a common organization once again. However, he felt that such unity could not be artificially imposed or achieved through a mere wish or desire for unity's sake alone. Rather, meaningful organic unity could only be achieved through an extensive process of collaboration in the unfolding struggles of the Canadian working class itself over a period of time.

In 1989 Ross suffered an unexpected stroke that left him partially paralyzed and unable to speak. For the next thirteen years he was cared for by his devoted sister Lois. His health slowly deteriorated. Finally, On February 17, 2002, Ross died.

It was a day that the bourgeoisie in Canada was able to breathe a little easier.

THE END

*This biographical essay is a compilation based on an original script by Harry Kopyto written on April 1, 2002 for the video/DVD production "Ross Dowson, Canadian revolutionary 1917-2002" and includes revisions and editing by Zane Boyd, Gord Doctorow and John Darling made for the final video/DVD script as presented on June 8, 2002 on Ryerson campus, Toronto. This compilation was finally edited by John Darling for the website [www.rossdowson.com](http://www.rossdowson.com) in October 2004.*

*Copies of the Memorial video mentioned above, as well as a video being released in 2005 entitled "55 Years of Struggle: Ross Dowson at 70" from a video shot in 1987 including personal reminiscences and testimonials of many of Ross's comrades, are now or will soon be available from [johndarling@vex.net](mailto:johndarling@vex.net) and are accessible at National Archives, Ottawa and at Trent University, Peterborough ON.*

#### GLOSSARY

N.A.T.O.      North American Treaty Organization

**Video script: Ross Dowson Memorial Tribute**

**June 8, 2002** – Ryerson University , Toronto

**PARTS 1-2-3 (original uncut script -- italicized sections were omitted from the video production due to time constraints)**

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*Opening remarks on video: Harry Kopyto, Ellie Kirzner*

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**PART 1: YOUTH**

Ross Jewitt Dowson, Canada's foremost Trotskyist leader for half a century, was born in Toronto on September 4, 1917, not without some irony on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The third eldest in a family of seven siblings, he was raised in West Toronto. His father, a skilled printer, was a self-educated, militant atheist and humanist, introduced Ross to radical thought and spawned in him an interest in ideas and literature. His mother, the daughter of a school principal, contributed to the family income as a stenographer. She attempted at an early age to enthuse Ross with religious training, but Ross sought his spiritualism elsewhere and was dissuaded from attending Sunday school because his skepticism embarrassed the church staff.

Ross was both a product and a shaper of the times he lived in. And what times they were! He came to maturity at a time of the Great Depression, and the Depression taught Ross what it meant to be part of the working class. He saw hunger, strikes, marches, demonstrations and police repression. He witnessed people with little share what they had, while those who had plenty kept it all to themselves. Inspired by the love of books he had acquired from his father, Ross devoured the novels of John Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Andre Malraux, Emile Zola, John Reed and Jack London, whose writings further shaped his critical outlook.

From his early youth, Ross seemed to interest himself in everything and he threw himself with abandon into whatever he pursued. He was an avid tennis player. And for a time he was also a serious amateur photographer.

It was during the 1930's that Ross became into contact with the Trotskyist movement (*whose cadres in Toronto and in Vancouver remained deeply embedded in industrial unions following their expulsion from the Communist Party starting in 1928.*) Ross' older brother Murray had joined the Trotskyist Workers' Party of Canada while a student at York Memorial Collegiate in northwest Toronto. The Workers' Party had been established in 1934 by former Communist Party leader Jack McDonald, and Maurice Spector who had earlier been the Communist Party's principal theoretician. These giants of the early Communist movement became signatories of an appeal initiated by Leon Trotsky in 1935 for the creation of a new International following the complete Stalinization of the Communist Third International and its conversion from a revolutionary into a reformist and counter-revolutionary force. The Fourth International was eventually launched in 1938.

### **Becoming a revolutionist**

Ross tagged along with Murray to meetings of the Party, a nuisance Murray found hard to shake. Ross was impressed by the classes on scientific socialism held by the Mount Dennis Spartacus Club, and at the age of 17, Ross announced to his bewildered mother and his family that he had decided to dedicate his life to being a professional revolutionary, whereupon he formally joined the Trotskyist movement.

While still a high school student, Ross supported the Eaton's garment factory strikers in Oshawa and the striking autoworkers, whose Toronto locals of the United Auto Workers were later among the first to affiliate to the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, the CCF, precursor to the New Democratic Party. He sold the *Vanguard*, the Workers' Party's paper, and helped to organize open air meetings at Toronto's Earls Court Park. One day, he was encouraged to do the speaking himself. And from then on, there was no turning back.

*(Ross learned how to run the Gestetner duplicator, participated in May Day marches and unemployed workers' demonstrations, and helped build the Workers' Party.)*

It was during this time that he met Maurice Spector. In 1928, along with James P. Cannon, representing the U.S. Communist Party, Spector had gone to Moscow as the Canadian party delegate to the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International. They were the first in North America to become partisans of Leon Trotsky, and they managed to smuggle out from Russia Trotsky's critique of the direction of the Comintern, whose revolutionary program and policies were being sacrificed by an increasingly bureaucratic and conservative leadership under Stalin. Shortly afterwards, Trotsky was exiled from the Soviet Union and his supporters expelled from Communist Parties around the globe including Canada.

Ross quickly became politically cross-fertilized by the intellectual ferment within the Workers' Party, which had significant connections both to Jewish trade unionists and the Ukrainian comrades and militants who published their own paper in the

Ukrainian language. He organized a Trotskyist youth group at York Memorial Collegiate, tried unsuccessfully to organize a union at Canada Packers where he worked during one summer, and vied with the larger Communist Party for leadership of the unemployed youth movement, which was fighting to receive cash relief instead of food vouchers.

During this time Ross was part of a group which helped workers facing evictions move their furniture back into their homes and help the homeless take possession of Coronation Park in Toronto West. There, they dug trenches in the ground for shelter, holding out for two months until the police broke up the occupation.

In June 1936, after completing Grade 13, Ross's life was at a turning point. With his father thrown out of work by a 4-year printers' strike, he got a job to help support the family. Meanwhile, he continued to focus his efforts on building the Workers Party, organizing aid for Spanish revolutionists and defending working class actions against attacks by Canadian fascists.

He also participated in the pioneering efforts of the Workers' Party to enter the CCF, which the Party saw as representing an independent political vehicle for workers and farmers. It was during this time that the Cooperative Commonwealth Youth Movement executive withheld a club charter from a club Ross had organized on his own initiative. The CCF bureaucrats wanted no club at all rather than one that had Ross in it.

### **The issue of entryism**

Perhaps the central strategic problem that small revolutionary Marxist organizations have had to face over the decades, in several countries including Canada, is their relationship to the much larger mass-based labor, socialist and communist parties. Ross's approach to this issue was not clarified overnight, and reflected the difficult lessons which he learned in the 1930s.

The tactic of entryism as it was known was not easily resolved within the Workers' Party. Trotskyists and others under their influence, had already been present in significant numbers as delegates to the founding convention of the CCF in 1933. However, the bureaucratic manipulations, red-baiting and lack of momentum in the CCF caused internal friction within the Workers Party over the entry tactic.

At that time, the only known version of entryism was the so-called "French Turn." This involved the deep entry into the mass workers' parties and the dissolution of the Trotskyist organization's public face. Comrades were considered "closed"; that is, they did not identify themselves openly as Trotskyists as a rule and they therefore gave up publishing their own paper. At a convention of the Workers' Party following a heated debate, the delegates decided by a vote of 35 to 20, to enter the CCF, which they did in May, 1937. The minority, however, refused to liquidate their public face in order to participate in the entry. Ross initially worked inside the CCF. However, by disposition,

he identified politically with those comrades who opposed the deep entry into the CCF.

It was at this time that Ross began to develop his flexibility to apply political principles to complex situations. From the majority, he learned the importance of orienting to the mass expression of independent class politics which the CCF had begun to represent. From the minority, he recognized the necessity of the movement maintaining an independent public profile — above all its own press. Following the Second World War, the Canadian Trotskyist movement, under Ross's leadership, synthesized these and other experiences, and formulated the concept of entryism on the basis of working as a fraction within the CCF, and later the NDP, with a long-term, non-split perspective.

This marked a unique contribution to the world Trotskyist movement, contrasting with the deep-entry tactics practiced by the French, American and Canadian comrades in the 1930s and that of the European comrades throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. It constitutes Ross Dowson's most significant and lasting contribution to the strategic and tactical arsenal of the world Trotskyist movement.

*(It was largely as a result of these difficult lessons first learned in the 1930s that the Canadian Trotskyist movement developed the flexibility and perspective that enabled it to eventually transform itself into a movement numbering in the hundreds while influencing thousands and even tens of thousands decades later.)*

Although the Workers Party had decided that the entry tactic was to last only until the fall convention of the CCF in 1938, the majority of comrades wanted to continue the entry afterwards. Under the leadership of the well-known poet Earl Birney and other intellectuals, the majority remained in the CCF, even publishing a left-wing paper until they were eventually expelled, an unceremonious conclusion to their entrism experiment.

The comrades then re-established their political presence by publicly launching the Socialist Workers' League. However, before they could consolidate and renew their national connections, the Second World War broke out, the War Measures Act was proclaimed, and the Canadian Trotskyist movement was driven underground.

## **PART 2: THE WAR YEARS**

The times were tough for a movement that openly opposed the war. While continuing to work at various jobs between 1938 and 1942 to support himself and his family, Ross organized anti-fascist demonstrations and defended opponents of the Second World War. The Socialist Workers' League saw its forces decimated, especially its intellectual leadership including Earle Birney who unexpectedly and without warning abandoned the Trotskyist movement as well as Marxism as a whole, and enlisted in the army. With Trotsky's murder in Mexico by a Stalinist agent in 1940, the movement was dealt a further blow.



The few remaining forces of the League got jobs in basic industries in order to implant themselves in the trade unions. Meanwhile, Ross made every effort in order to keep the organization intact under conditions of illegality, including distributing an underground paper until 1942. Accepting responsibility for the continued functioning of the Canadian Trotskyist movement, Ross for the first time shifted from being **a leader** of the movement to becoming **the leader** of the movement.

### **First a cross-Canada tour, then a tour in the Army**

In 1941, Ross went on a western tour where he renewed connections that the movement had established during the 1930s. It was a difficult trek that took Ross to Northern Saskatchewan, Alberta and B.C., where he met many old militants. In Vancouver, he spent a month with Paddy Stanton, an ex-Wobbly and CCFer, who was leading the fight against the Communist Party campaign for a wartime no-strike pledge in its rabid support for the war effort.

Upon returning to Toronto, Ross applied to join the army, which was then a precondition to getting a job. His doctor assured him he would be rejected because he had flat feet. Instead, to his surprise, he found himself donning a uniform in 1942 and conscripted into the service of Her Majesty's Armed Forces.

For the next two years, Ross was stationed at Camp Borden advancing from private to corporal in the Canadian infantry and eventually becoming a second lieutenant. He tried to resign from his commission—which would have given him greater freedom as a private—but his efforts were rebuffed by the army brass. Still, he was able to circulate anti-war literature to his soldier friends, two of whom were recruited to the Socialist Workers' League.

As the war was drawing to a close, he led a fight to block army efforts to recruit soldiers to lay and tamp track-lines between Toronto and Hamilton at army rates of pay instead of regular workers' wages. Ross led a protest at a railroad job site after refusing to carry out a direct order that would require him to work in isolation from the rest of the detail. As was his duty, he advised his second-in-command of his intended protest and the obligation he had to arrest Ross. Ross organized the resulting protest amongst the privates. On being arrested, he was escorted by two soldiers who paraded him back to camp to be confined to barracks. But, as agreed, the 45 men on the detail also fell in behind him. They were all confined to barracks with Ross, risking dishonorable discharge.

However, while on leave, Ross attended a weekend CCF picnic in Toronto, and told CCF leader M.J. Coldwell about the Army exploiting the army-paid soldiers as low-wage labor. Coldwell shortly afterwards denounced this practice in the House of Commons, and the King government was forced to immediately begin demobilization, and to start paying current wage rates to soldiers.

A few weeks later in December 1944, the brass bid Ross adieu as they discharged

him from the army, releasing him once again to play the role of a dutiful private citizen.

### **PART 3: THE POST-WAR YEARS**

As the war neared its end, the Socialist Workers' League initiated efforts to regroup itself. In October 1944, the SWL met in Montreal, electing Ross as its secretary pending his release from the army.

The post-war period witnessed a dramatic growth in the labor militancy of the young soldiers who had just risked their lives to fight for democracy and who were not only expecting but demanding jobs, housing, and a decent standard of living as a reward for victory. It was a time of heady struggles, which saw the unionization of the steel and auto industry in Canada. Labor historian Bryan Palmer quotes statistics that show that in 1946 to 1947, large strikes caused well over seven million worker-days lost in Canada.

In order to meet the new challenges and opportunities which had opened up, the Canadian Trotskyists founded a new organization, the Revolutionary Workers' Party, and began moving out boldly in their own name. In Vancouver, two pioneers of the Canadian Communist Party, Max Armstrong and Malcolm Bruce, joined the Trotskyist movement at the war's end.

They were joined by Reg and Ruth Bullock, who became the mainstay of the RWP in British Columbia, where the Trotskyists became well implanted in the broad left wing of the CCF and gained significant influence within some key trade unions (*including the Woodworkers Union where Jean-Marie Bédard became the eastern Canadian head of the International Woodworkers of America.*)

#### **The post-war resurgence**

In Toronto, Ross Dowson played a central role in the post-war work of the RWP. He assumed the position of executive secretary, edited the RWP's new paper *Labor Challenge*, ran for public office, and continued his lifelong avocation as full-time revolutionist living a frugal life on the dues and pledges of the comrades. Although dedicating his day-to-day life to party-building, Ross managed to find time to read the novels of James T. Farrell, Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck, to follow and study the design school of the Bauhaus, the murals of Diego Rivera, the history of the Dadaist movement and to nurture his passionate interest in architecture about which he had fiercely held views and was a profession to which he himself had once aspired in his youth.

In 1945 a Labour Party government was elected in England under Clement Atlee on a program which reflected the heightened militancy of the British working class, including public ownership of the railways, mines, and steel industry. The victory in Britain projected the possibility of workers in Canada also taking power through the CCF

whose cross-country popularity had soared during the war years.

### **The RWP moves out**

When the CCF did not live up to this challenge, the RWP moved out itself. One of the areas in which the CCF failed to provide a labor alternative was municipal politics. In the absence of CCF or labor candidates running in Toronto mayoralty campaigns, Ross filled the bill, contesting the mayoralty to ensure that the class was not left without an alternative to capitalist politicians at the ballot box.

In one of several election campaigns for mayor in Toronto, one of every five Torontonians voted for Ross, prompting the *Globe & Mail*, the staid mouthpiece of Canada's elite to chastise the Toronto electorate for voting in such numbers for a person with a subversive foreign ideology.

### **The dog days of the 1950s**

It was not long, however, before the international red scare, along with the massive buildup of nuclear weapons in the Cold War, was launched by the United States and Britain.

*(The Witch Hunt was first initiated in Canada in 1946 with the Gouzenko spy scandal and accelerated with the "Iron Curtain" speech by Winston Churchill in Fulton, Missouri, which marked the start of the Cold War, the massive buildup of nuclear weapons, and the threat of nuclear annihilation. This new climate isolated and weakened the Trotskyist movement once again, along with the Left as a whole.)*

By the early 1950s, following the ebb of the labor upsurge, the red-baiting hysteria which led to McCarthyism in the United States had taken its toll on the Canadian movement as well, resulting in overwhelming state surveillance of the legitimate activities of members of the movement by the RCMP *(as part of its illicit "Operation Odd-Job" and many comrades found themselves expelled from the CCF.)*

Then, suddenly in 1953, the Fourth International itself split. One of its top *(European)* leaders, Michel Pablo, argued that since the capitalist class was driving the world to a nuclear war, the Trotskyist movement did not have time for patient educational work. It was urgently necessary, he claimed, to immediately and covertly implant all of the Trotskyists' meager forces into existing communist, socialist, and labor parties with the aim of replenishing and regrouping its forces in time for an open revolutionary struggle to prevent the impending third world war. The majority in Canada under Ross's leadership sided with the US Socialist Workers' Party as well as other Trotskyist organizations, mostly from the British Commonwealth, in opposing this perspective.

A bitter and demoralizing rift split the Canadian movement as the minority who supported Pablo abandoned the RWP following a fierce debate.

The RWP was reduced to only a few adherents around Reg and Ruth Bullock in Vancouver and Ross Dowson in Toronto with a few members-at-large in between. The Vancouver comrades renamed themselves the Socialist Information Centre, while the Toronto group identified themselves as the Socialist Educational League.

*(Both operated out of modest bookstores and adjacent halls, held public forums on a weekly basis, and sought to consolidate and educate the forces around them against enormous social pressures to abandon revolutionary politics.)*

Although harassed and isolated, the SEL nevertheless managed to attract a small number of sophisticated and highly capable new cadres. Older comrades, including Ross's brothers, Murray and Hugh, and his sister Joyce, remained active in the Autoworkers, the Rubber Workers, the Teamsters and the needle trade unions and helped Ross maintain the continuity of the movement and its politics *(with his younger sister Lois as a benefactor of the movement –eds.)*. Meanwhile, newer, younger leaders were beginning to step in, including Ken Sutherland, Pat Schulz, and Jim Mitchell who became the editor of a new journal *Workers Vanguard* in December 1955.

Comrades in the SEL intervened in the few struggles taking place during this era, notably the “Ban the Bomb” and the anti-nuclear shelter movement that began gaining momentum by the mid-to-late fifties *(early 1960s –ed)*. Under Ross’s leadership, the SEL sought out every opportunity to replenish its meager forces. When the Communist Party fell apart in 1956 and 1957 following Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev’s revelations of Stalin’s crimes, at the same time as his brutal repression of the Hungarian Revolution, the SEL moved out aggressively in an unsuccessful attempt to win over dissidents who were leaving the Communist Party in droves.

Young recruits such as Ernie Tate, Alan Harris, Cliff Orchard, Pat Brain, *(and John Darling)* led several “Trailblazers tours” across the country at this time selling the *Workers’ Vanguard* at plant gates and subscriptions door-to-door and keeping in touch with political contacts from Sydney, Nova Scotia *(and Cornerbrook, Newfoundland)* to the Prairies, and to the Pacific Coast. In Toronto, a consistent campaign to sell copies of the American Trotskyist youth paper *Young Socialist* at high schools recruited several rebel youth *(including Harry Kopyto and Mitch Podolak.)*

All of this took place at a time of virulent anti-Communism during which the CCF itself declined as a meaningful political force and no longer offered a viable alternative to the capitalist parties, nor effectively represented the voice of labor in the corridors of power. With the party in rapid decline, Ross challenged the CCF leadership to step aside from fielding a candidate in a provincial election to allow the Socialist Educational League to contest the seat in a riding where the CCF had no chance of success. When the CCF brass refused, Ross ran as a candidate anyway in order to ensure that the voice of socialism would be heard.

*(Throughout these heady times when the labor movement was flexing its muscles,*

*Ross continued to play a multiplicity of roles. From the time that Labor Challenge proclaimed "There is no Peace" in its first post-war edition coinciding with Armistice Day in 1945 until the chill of the Cold War caused working class militancy to evaporate, Ross provided tactical guidance to the trade union comrades in the movement. He edited and himself wrote a good part of Labor Challenge, which he also helped distribute at factory gates. He organized an educational program that included movie showings, panel discussions, and public forums on the issues of the day. He raised the public face of the movement by professionally managing a number of bookstores over the years. He corresponded extensively with comrades across Canada and the world, he was a key activist and organizer in the Toronto branch and he applied himself diligently on a daily basis to "clipping the papers" so that key developments could be consistently followed in preparation for editorial board discussions, for public forums, and for internal educational events and discussion. Ross therefore stepped into the role of theoretical leader, organizer, editor and agitator.*

*What was it about Ross that enabled him to fulfill so many roles? The answer lies in several of his personal attributes. First, Ross had a strong sense of what was objectively possible, an appreciation of the role that an individual could actually play in shaping forces that could affect history, and he had a strong sense of responsibility and obligation to fulfill this role. His political vision was shaped by Jack MacDonald, Maurice Spector, and other giants of the Trotskyist movement who had similarly dedicated their lives to free the working class. He was imbued with the same spirit of dedication and class solidarity that they had, and the same down-to-earth attitude of rolling up your sleeves and getting the job done.*

*Second, Ross' commitment to socialism was concrete and action-oriented. He excelled in connecting the here and now to the future, in linking what existed to what had to be done. Ross knew that, to walk a mile, you had to start with a first step. He saw the interconnectedness of all the steps as a continuum. Whatever adversities he faced, tactical solutions became evident to him. He was able to connect the dots. Even in the darkest days of the movement's existence, he was always able to see the future and work to realize it. Third and perhaps most important, Ross experienced a genuine joy in his political life, which gave him reason and purpose to exist. He never asked anyone to do anything he wasn't prepared to do himself. He told the comrades that they were the most important persons on earth. He had a great sense of the historical purpose and role of the working class about which he held no illusions yet to which he dedicated himself with a great sense of passion. He cast himself in the mold of Trotsky, whose sense of personal obligation in the historic process led him to state, "Each of us carries a particle of history on his back," and "Let the Philistines hunt their individuality in empty space." Finally, Ross was imbued with a high level of energy and physical stamina, pacing himself for the end-run as he applied himself methodically to each task at hand.*

*(Added note by the editors: Ross showed a great sensitivity to developments in the arts community: poets Joe Rosenblatt, Al Purdy, Gwen McEwen and Milton Acorn were speakers at the regular forms of the group in this period.)*

***From revolutionist to revolutionary***

*(Ross' outstanding accomplishment during this time was his utter tenacity. He refused to abandon the lessons that he had learned with difficulty in favor of illusory shortcuts or panicky reactions. He offered no room to, and refused to truck with those who were prepared to dump their traditions because the going was rough. The tougher the going, the more intolerant Ross became of those who wavered under pressure. It was during this period that, one can say, Ross turned from a revolutionist to a revolutionary, from one who aspired to make a revolution to one who proved that he had the mettle to achieve one.*

*(The survival of the movement was at stake. Heated discussions took place during this decade of witch-hunts and the severe isolation of socialists, of the world-wide post-war business boom and the general quiescence of the labor movement. Outside of the anti-nuclear war movement and the defence of victims of state repression, there were few political arenas to intervene in to replenish the now thin ranks of the organization.*

*(Just as Ross' tenacity kept the ideas of scientific socialism alive in the fight against Pabloism, so did his tenacity keep the organization in Toronto alive during this nadir of its existence. Ross searched out every opportunity to build the movement, even if this meant only an occasional recruit. A caravan was organized to visit cities large and small across Canada, both east and west of Toronto, door to door; to sell copies and renew subscriptions to Workers' Vanguard as the paper was then known and to keep in touch with contacts. These cross-country caravans were admittedly targeted by the RCMP Security Service which, on several occasions, interfered with the caravan's work including breaking into the vans the comrades used to travel across the country, and stealing their subscription records and other material. At the same time, classes on Marxist economics and other topics were held regularly.)*

*Video script: Ross Dowson Tribute – June 8, 2002 -- PARTS 4-5 --*

**Part 4: The Youth and Student Radicalization** – Burgeoning growth and independent activity – Ross as internationalist – The professional psyche – Three outstanding political developments – Ross in Europe – An ill-fated transfer of leadership – Factional debate and split

**Part 5: Against the Stream** – Popularizing the Constituent Assembly – In defense of the Polish Solidarnosc. – Dowson vs. RCMP

#### **PART 4: THE YOUTH AND STUDENT RADICALIZATION**

By 1960, the international situation began to turn around. The Cuban Revolution and the struggle against segregation by Blacks in the United States began to frame a new era of political activity. Meanwhile, in Canada, the CCF dissolved itself. The New Party, soon to be known as the New Democratic Party, emerged from the shell of the CCF and reconstituted itself with strong organic links to the labor movement. Ross realized the historic significance of the new party which grew in part out of the unification of Canada's two main trade union federations.

*(Ross Dowson speaking:)* “The founding of the new labor party in Ottawa at the end of this month is the most important event in the history of the tumultuous struggles of the Canadian people – the most important event that had ever taken place in Canada; and this article talked about the profound struggles that have taken place in Canada: the Quebec shipyard struggles away back in 1741 – that (article) tried to give a whole span – a panorama – in a very short form, of great pages of great struggles of the Canadian working people. And we said ‘this is the most important of them all.’ The most important of them all. More important than the Winnipeg General Strike; more important than the rise of the CIO – that’s what we said. No matter under what form these revolutionary socialists functioned, their primary purpose – what they’ve always looked upon as the necessary first step, is the launching of the whole working class, and getting it moving forward as a class, in the right direction. With the forming of the New Party based on the trade unions, the primary organizations of the working class, this aim is being realized – by the formation of the N.D.P.” *(end of spoken insert)*

He himself attended the founding convention in Ottawa in 1961, supporting MP Hazen Argue, who campaigned for the party leadership against Tommy Douglas on a left, anti-NATO program. On the other hand, when Tommy Douglas was elected, Ross

hailed the new leader's declaration that the NDP would pose the need for socialism in the upcoming federal elections.

Under Ross's initiative, Canadian Trotskyists quickly responded to the new political situation. In 1961 they formally united, establishing the League for Socialist Action, to take advantage of the new openings offered by the founding of the New Democratic Party and the unfolding colonial revolution. Shortly before, a youth section, the Young Socialists, was established by the younger comrades that was autonomous and independent, but in political solidarity with the LSA.

Sympathizers of the movement were encouraged to establish and lead the Fair Play for Cuba Committee in which the League played the critical role in Canada in defence of the Cuban Revolution. This organization held demonstrations, raised funds, sponsored tours to Cuba, and distributed by the thousands, Castro's Second Declaration of Havana outlining the socialist nature of the Cuban Revolution (*along with the LSA's own pamphlets and regular FPCC newsletters on the Cuban Revolution.*)

Comrades not only joined the NDP but were encouraged to play an active role on riding executives. New young members were being attracted to the Young Socialists one by one, often from the New Democratic Youth. The Workers' Vanguard increased its frequency as well as its circulation during this time, and comrades played critical roles in a number of trade union struggles including Teamsters Union Local 938 which, under the leadership of a caucus initiated by the LSA, closed down the trucking industry in Ontario for an entire month in 1962, and publish local caucus bulletins over a three-year period.

By 1963, as the League's forces gained influence within the New Democratic Youth and were poised to win the organization to pro-Cuban and anti-NATO line, fourteen youth comrades along with Peter Woodsworth, a grandnephew of the CCF's founder and leader, were expelled from the NDP. A broad, aggressive campaign was held within the NDP and NDY against the expulsions. The League published a pamphlet and organized a cross-Canada speaking tour resulting in still more new members joining the Young Socialists.

Somewhat ironically, as a result of the expulsions, an entire new group of young and up-and-coming cadre were now suddenly available to openly represent the League and the Young Socialists within the developing youth radicalization. By 1965, the movement against the war in Vietnam had begun to coalesce with the emerging student power movement. Comrades intervened openly and boldly as Trotskyists in these new movements. The Young Socialists soon saw their forces dramatically double and triple in size in a short period of time, as it aggressively recruited a new layer of young activists.

*(The Young Socialists established its own headquarters at 32 Cecil Street in Toronto, published an attractive monthly magazine, Young Socialist Forum, formed the backbone of the campus-based committees to end the war in Vietnam, established high school committees against the war, and played central roles in the emerging movements for women's liberation, defence of the colonial revolution, and solidarity with the Black*



*struggle in the southern United States).*

## **H. Burgeoning growth and independent activity**

The sudden growth of the Canadian Trotskyist movement and its increased public profile coincided with a decline of militancy and opportunities within the NDP by the mid-1960s. The NDP remained as always the focus of the LSA's politics, but the Trotskyist movement began to increasingly centre its day-to-day activities on the developing mass movements that were emerging largely outside the NDP. The latter half of the 1960s witnessed an even more dramatic growth in the forces of the Canadian Trotskyist movement, which eventually consisted of some 350 to 400 adherents across the country. These comrades managed to exert a political influence far beyond what their numbers would ordinarily warrant. Between the YS and LSA local and federal offices in Toronto, a dozen comrades worked full-time for the movement during this period. Several branches and locals of the League and Young Socialists were established in cities across Canada from Black's Harbour, New Brunswick to Victoria, BC. Comrades were sent across the country to "colonize" new locals in Winnipeg, Waterloo, London, Hamilton, Ottawa, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Kingston, and several other cities. Young Socialists contested student elections and were elected to the presidencies of Simon Fraser University and York University student councils.

*(To facilitate the discussion of its work and to accommodate its larger membership, the Toronto branch was subdivided into three locals, one east, one west, and one in north Toronto, which met on alternate weeks. By 1965, most of the comrades in the movement assumed more modest positions on the NDP riding executives while at the same time moving out aggressively in the public eye).*

In Quebec, four comrades who had been sent there in 1964 to "colonize" the province, as the term was then used, soon became the core of a francophone movement known as La Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière / Ligue des Jeunes Socialistes, which also experienced a rapid though more modest growth, publishing its own paper *La Lutte Ouvrière* and later, *Libération*. The LSO/LJS immediately recognized the centrality of the fight for the defence of the French language, and unequivocally supported the emerging indépendantiste movement, thereby giving the LSO/LJS the credibility of influence far beyond its numbers.

## **I. Ross as internationalist**

During this period, Ross, always internationalist in his outlook and his orientation, encouraged comrades who had moved to Canada from elsewhere to return, and to build the Trotskyist movement and to lead their various struggles, in their own countries. Ernie Tate and Pat Brain moved to London, England to work side by side with Bertrand Russell in the International War Crimes Tribunal set up to investigate US war crimes in

Vietnam. Keith Locke returned to New Zealand where he became the leading spokesperson of the movement against nuclear armaments and also against the war in Vietnam in that country. Other comrades returned to Scotland, to Mexico, to Australia and to the United States. Meanwhile, Gus Tolentino, a doctor and member of the LSA, traveled to Hanoi as part of a delegation investigating the effect of cluster-bombs and other anti-personnel weapons on the people of North Vietnam.

In response to the new radicalization, Ross developed and assisted the younger up-and-coming leadership of the LSA to develop an analysis and program on a number of emerging issues. In 1968 the League presented a brief to the Federal government's Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Later published as an influential pamphlet, this brief outlined many of the critical demands and issues that were adopted by the mass feminist movement in Canada later on, thus anticipating the direction of its future growth. Ross also participated in the development of a rounded analysis of the Native question in Canada and the advocacy of Red Power and self-determination for indigenous peoples. With his encouragement and advice, the youth comrades put forward a program to democratize the universities and high schools, advocating student-faculty and support-staff control of these institutions.

One of Ross's most significant contributions during this period was to inspire the LSA to assume the leadership role in the anti-Vietnam war movement in Canada. Ross in fact helped establish the central political demands of the Canadian anti-war movement, above all the demand to "End Canada's Complicity" in the war, a formulation he himself developed. Advancing the slogan "Withdraw US troops Now" as opposed to the Communist Party's demands to end the bombing and for a negotiated settlement, as well as to oppose the slogan "Victory to the Viet Cong" promoted by ultra-left forces, comrades from the LSA and Young Socialists organized and led the campus and high school committees to end the war in Vietnam, and were instrumental in all the main coalitions that organized the protests and demonstrations against the war in that era.

*(No one active in the left during this time could avoid knowing of the Trotskyist movement and having to adopt a position in relation to it. It sometimes felt that the League was in a constant state of mobilization during that time, as its influence far exceeded what one would assume a hundred comrades would ordinarily obtain. This fact was well appreciated by the RCMP Security Service which amassed a dossier on Ross that exceeded two thousand pages in one surveillance bank alone.)*

It was during this time too that Camp Poundmaker was founded. Built on a few acres of rocky terrain near Lake Ontario, mid-way between Toronto and Montreal, the Camp was named after the great Native leader. Ross was critical in purchasing and maintaining the camp from the Victoria Day weekend in May when a fireworks display was the main attraction, to Thanksgiving in October when roast turkey and pumpkin pie were featured. The camp became a centre for educationals, discussions, meetings, conferences and of course plenty of fun and horseplay. Hundreds of comrades and political contacts over the years spent weekends, weeks and, sometimes entire summers at the large lodge built by the comrades themselves or in the tiny cabins scattered

throughout the grounds. Bonfires, sing-songs and intense political discussions, jokes and laughter all merged in the evening air, often lasting well into the night

On a more personal note, Ross never married — such a commitment would have diverted him from the main aim of his life. But while he devoted his entire life to building and defending the Trotskyist movement, Ross lived a full life nonetheless. He loved and cared deeply for his family. He compensated for not having children of his own by enjoying the children around the movement and among his family. He played the role of a loving uncle to the son and three daughters of his brother Hugh, encouraging them to take risks, to live their lives fully, and to struggle to realize their goals.

## **J. On the professional psyche**

*(Ross made sure the LSA headquarters always had 50-cent lunches of jam, peanut butter, bread and drinks available in the hall at the back of the bookstore, where forums were held and everyone was welcome. The halls usually also accommodated meeting rooms, a fridge, libraries, duplicators and sometimes a Multilith press to print the papers and pamphlets.*

*Ross made every effort to integrate new comrades into the leadership of the movement. He welcomed the new forces entering the movement in the 60s and early 70s with open arms. He respected the autonomy of the youth movement and its right to make its own decisions whether he agreed with them or not. Comrades found, however, they had to be prepared to defend their positions when Ross was involved in discussions and debates. Ross was formidable and could even be intimidating when arguing his point of view. His impeccable logic, his insistence on disciplined thought, and his emphasis on the importance of implementing decisions once they were agreed upon, was evident to all who came in contact with him. Heated debate within the editorial board of the Workers' Vanguard and later Labor Challenge was quite common during this period of time. Whatever their differences, comrades were expected to fulfill the norms and obligations of membership, which involved both internal responsibilities as well as participation in an outside area of political work. Interestingly, some of the practices that the movement had developed over time, including security concerns that had become no longer necessary such as the use of pseudonyms to protect the identity of the comrades in the minutes of the League's meetings, reflected habits that were shaped by another era.*

*In some respects, the very strengths that Ross exhibited — strengths that had ensured the survival of the movement in leaner times such as substituting himself for others when a job had to be done — were no longer productive in the context of a growing movement. Ross exhibited skepticism toward the movement's dissidents and a tendency to be irascible and confrontational. While Ross was a good educator, encouraging comrades to read the Marxist classics — even helping them extensively in their own particular areas of interest and promoting them to positions of responsibility and leadership — he could be passionate, even explosive, when he perceived comrades were not serious and open to reconsider their positions. Such emotion, however, was not a product of inflexible thinking or a dogmatic approach. On the contrary, Ross' thinking was fluid and remarkably intuitive. As an example, the Three Mile Island nuclear*

*meltdown and the nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl caused him to rethink and then totally abandon his previous adamant support for nuclear power. Even in his evaluation of individuals, he would reconsider his opinions, often implicitly admitting his initial failure to appreciate a comrade's talents or his overestimation of another's abilities. And his contempt for dogma showed itself when, for instance, in the 1960s, he vehemently debated those like Barry Lord, editor of Arts Canada, who advocated a narrow political line on questions of art).*

## **K. Three outstanding political developments**

There were three outstanding political developments that took place during the height of the radicalization in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ross played a critical role in developing a cogent analysis and in orienting the Trotskyist movement in its intervention in each case.

The first event involved the rise of nationalism in Quebec, which was directed against the central Canadian federal state. Along with other comrades, Ross applied himself to assessing the historical and contemporary nature of this nationalist current and its political significance. Within English Canada, the League for Socialist Action, LSA, defended Quebec's right to self-determination, unsuccessfully challenging the NDP to adopt this vital democratic policy. Meanwhile, in Quebec itself, La Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière / Ligue des Jeunes Socialistes intervened in the nationalist milieu with a program that promoted the socialist alternative in the context of an independent Quebec state. Expressed in the concept "For an Independent and Socialist Quebec," this orientation gained the Quebec comrades a wide hearing and influence, and enabled them to soon establish their branches of the Trotskyist movement throughout Quebec's major urban centres.

*(This nationalist mood had by the 1960s infused itself into the ranks of the working class as a whole. Further, the nationalist movement reflected the collective yearnings of the Québécois for an independent state. This proletarian thrust to Québécois nationalism was centered around the demand for the primacy of the French language. The Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière was prominent in its demand for French unilingualism and in support of French-only schools for allophone (other than French or English) immigrant children. Hundreds of copies of the LSO tabloid Libération were sold at rallies and demonstrations, as the earlier publication La Lutte Ouvrière had also been distributed since the 1964.)*

*(At the same time, the absence of a labor party in Quebec, largely as a result of the failure of the NDP to recognize the right of the Québécois to determine their own future federally and in not identifying with their indépendantiste sentiment provincially, constituted an impasse to creating a unified nationalist movement that was clearly socialist in character. The Québécois working class thus expressed its nationalist aspirations through the petit-bourgeois Parti Québécois. While the LSA advocated the right of self-determination for Quebec in the rest of Canada, the Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière implanted itself as a significant force in the left wing of the Quebec nationalist*

*movement. It was no accident that the mayoralty candidate of the LSO in Montreal was rounded up and jailed on October 15, 1970 when Prime Minister Trudeau proclaimed the War Measures Act in an effort to smash the nationalist movement.)*

Meanwhile, in English Canada, a second radical development had begun to take shape by the early 1960s. Spurred in large part by the expansion of the US war against the people of Vietnam, a strong anti-imperialist sentiment was rapidly developing throughout Canadian society. In late 1971, a spontaneous protest broke out against the testing of a nuclear bomb by the US Government on Amchitka Island in Alaska. Seeing the test as an immediate threat to Canada's environment and a blatant escalation of the nuclear arms race, one million Canadians, including hundreds of thousands of students took to the streets from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island on the day that the tests took place. Many of those who attended the largest demonstration in Canadian history spontaneously began singing Canada's national anthem, "Oh Canada." What were revolutionary Marxists to make of this profound outpouring of nationalist sentiment and anger?

Ross had already, by 1968, begun to analyze and write about Canada's unique relationship with the United States. Drawing on the analyses of academics and journalists as well as engaging in first-hand research, Ross concluded that as Canada was juxtaposed to the most powerful capitalist state in the world, the Canadian bourgeoisie was among the weakest of any advanced capitalist country in the world, and that the United States capitalist class dominated virtually every significant sector of the Canadian economy; and that the Canadian ruling class was a junior partner of US imperialism. This analysis had already been endorsed by a wide majority at the LSA's 1968 convention, including almost its entire central leadership, and was widely circulated in a pamphlet published in 1969 entitled "Canada-US Relations."

Now, following the Amchitka protests, Ross characterized this rising Canadian nationalist sentiment, which included a burgeoning movement for autonomy within Canada's trade unions, as "an elemental anti-imperialist sentiment." Rather than reflecting the staid patriotism of the Canadian bourgeoisie, this new nationalist sentiment, he maintained, was in fact challenging the capitalist status quo. This analysis was embraced by the LSA, which began carrying more and more articles in its press on this issue. In adopting this analysis, the movement's approach was compared to Trotsky's analysis of the nationalist sentiment among the Catalan masses against the central Spanish state in the 1930s, which Trotsky had characterized as "the envelope of their social indignation."

*(Ross thus applied the movement's earlier economic analysis to the Amchitka protests, drawing from such analysis the political and programmatic lessons to be learned. Such analysis went contrary to a dogmatic interpretation of orthodox Marxism in which nationalism in an advanced capitalist country was perceived to be by definition reactionary. Dialectician that he was, he urged that, while we are internationalists, we should identify with the nationalist sentiment insofar as it expressed democratic and anti-imperialist sentiments. Ross quickly convinced the rest of the comrades to follow his*

*lead in framing transitional demands in the context of Canadian nationalism.)*

The validity of this analysis had already become apparent in yet a third significant development. From the mid-60s until the close of the decade, the NDP had remained largely on the political sidelines of the new mass movement. Nevertheless, throughout this time, the LSA continued to make the NDP the focus of its politics, seeking to educate its new young recruits and the left in general on the centrality of the NDP as Canada's labor party, and the need to win it to the role of an anti-war, pro-feminist, pro-student party.

Sensing an opportunity to bring new forces into the Party, NDP Leader David Lewis suddenly steered the Party to the left, identifying with the anti-war movement, and explicitly attacking US imperialism by name at an anti-war rally in Ottawa in 1970. Later that same year, the NDP stood alone in opposing the War Measures Act *(and shortly thereafter, it ran a federal election campaign in which a high profile attack on "corporate welfare bums" became the New Democratic Party's major theme)*. The NDP was becoming prominent again.

By 1969, the growing Canadian nationalist sentiment intersected with the NDP and labor movement, resulting with the formation of the Waffle group within the party in Ontario and soon afterwards in BC, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the Maritimes. Calling for massive public ownership of Canada's industries and financial institutions, the Waffle's program gained wide appeal and support throughout the party, initially – at least verbally – even from some among its leadership.

*(Thus, as an amalgam of trade unionists, economic nationalists and anti-war activists and academics headed by Professors Mel Watkins and Jim Laxer, the Waffle infused the NDP with radical demands framed within a nationalist context.)*

Public ownership of runaway plants, explicit opposition to Canada's role as handmaiden to the United States war machine, the demand to quit NATO, and autonomy and democracy in the US-dominated international unions were soon all being posed by the Waffle and debated throughout the NDP right across the country.

Finally, in a confrontation with the NDP brass and union tops in Orillia (*Ontario Provincial council meeting*) in 1972, attended by over 700 delegates and observers, the Waffle was ordered to disband for allegedly being a "party within a party." Forty percent of the delegates defended the Waffle. League members who had been active in the Waffle organized a stay-and-fight campaign. However, a majority of Wafflers chose to leave the NDP to found the Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada, or MISC as it became known. As it turned out, the new organization soon fizzled away, as it became quickly isolated from the labor movement and its centre of politics in the NDP. Still, as a left nationalist current, the Waffle had embraced socialism and succeeded in forming the largest-ever opposition within the NDP up to that point, and since.

## **L. Ross in Europe (1963)**

At this point we digress to discuss another different and important contribution which Ross made earlier in the 1960s.

In 1963, along with Joe Hanson, a central leader of the US Socialist Workers' Party, Ross left Canada for Europe. Their purpose was to attempt to reunify the Trotskyist Fourth International, which had been divided for a decade following the split with Michel Pablo. A Reunification Congress took place that same year; Ross was elected to the United Secretariat; and the various sections of the Fourth International became better poised to play central roles in the 1960's radicalization across the globe.

*(As Ross began his work in Europe with the Fourth International at its headquarters in France, he became increasingly uneasy with the structural forms of organization on that continent. His method of operation differed significantly from that of the European comrades. The Canadian movement was organized on the British model, with comrades active in the branches where they lived, meeting weekly and doing fraction work in their same area of political work. The European comrades tended to organize provisionally as "cellules" in their work areas, holding membership meetings in their metropolitan areas less frequently. This gave European organizations a looseness and lack of cohesion in the way they worked, without the same geographical rootedness the movement had in Canada.)*

While he was in Europe, Ross was asked by the comrades of the United Secretariat to help develop the program for the Algerian Revolution then underway. Ross objected to this assignment complaining that the program should be worked out by the Algerian comrades, who were most familiar with the situation. He did not feel comfortable playing the role of a mentor parachuted into an area he was unfamiliar with, and felt that he was being substituted for the forces on the ground. He argued that the Fourth International had to be based on strong and rooted national sections, not directed from outside.

Instead, Ross returned to Canada a few months later, where he helped popularize the Tripoli Program, which was eventually adopted as a result of the work of the Algerian comrades themselves. The LSA sent comrades to Algeria to study the revolution, organized tours in its defence, and distributed thousands of copies of the Tripoli Program throughout the country.

## **M. An ill-fated transfer of leadership**

As the 1960s drew to a close, and as new and vital forces continued to be drawn into the movement, Ross decided to transfer the leadership of the LSA completely over to the younger layer of leading cadre who had emerged over the previous decade. Ross eventually resigned his position as Executive Secretary in 1972, nominating in his place John Riddell, a former youth activist who had joined the movement in 1960.

In 1970, Ross headed to Europe to again work with the Fourth International at its headquarters in Brussels. However, he soon began to feel ill at ease. While in Europe, Ross continued to closely follow *Labor Challenge* and *Young Socialist* and to correspond with comrades in Canada. He soon became alarmed at the direction the Canadian movement appeared to be taking, notably what he felt was an increasing abandonment of critical and principled politics in its press. Ross returned to Canada within a year of having left.

By the early 1970s, the LSA and Young Socialists, which had previously recruited members in Toronto one by one and occasionally in twos or threes suddenly found itself the object of interest of organized entire groups of radical youth who were joining the movement.

*(In Toronto, two groups—the Old Mole and the Red Circle—had evolved from the New Left, as the anti-Stalinist left became known, to Marxism and Leninism, although their Leninism was of a form alien to the League. Believing that the League had an obligation to open its doors to all radicalizing forces rather than maintain sectarian purity in solitary isolation, two dozen or so members were admitted to the movement in Toronto following limited discussions and without undergoing common experiences. This suddenly enlarged the League in a way that had not been previously seen.)*

However, the new comrades were mainly students or academics who had little or no experience in working class organizations, including the NDP. In Ross's view, they lacked any rootedness in the traditions and history of the working class, let alone of the Trotskyist movement. He felt they reflected the spirit of impatience that characterized the ultra-leftism that was widespread within the youth radicalization at the time, *(generated by the inspiration of the Cuban Revolution and crescendoing in the worker-student revolt in France in 1968-69.)*

Then, to Ross's dismay, the principle of unconditional but critical support for Canada's labor party that had been the major component and orientation of Canadian Trotskyism for decades was steadily being challenged by a new majority in the LSA. Instead, the LSA was soon promoting a position of "conditional" support for the NDP and its provincial governments in its press.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the fact that the new leadership under Riddell had for the previous five years embraced Ross's analysis of Canadian economy and that of the emerging anti-imperialist sentiment, this same leadership now suddenly took their distance from this analysis. Instead, they adopted the view that they themselves had rejected back in 1968, namely, that Canada was a major imperialist power and that Canadian nationalism was therefore by definition bourgeois and reactionary. Overnight, the Riddell leadership had adapted to ultra-leftists both within and outside its ranks, which had from the outset opposed and sought to undermine the LSA's longstanding orientation to the NDP, and had attacked its position on Canadian nationalism. *This opposition had been centered in the Old Mole and Red Circle tendencies, now both*



*combined and renamed the Revolutionary Communist Tendency (RCT) which categorically rejected 40 years of experience of orientation to the CCF-NDP. Ross suddenly found himself a political stranger in the movement that he had built over several decades.*

## **N. Factional debates and split**

*(The discussion that took place in the movement during the pre-convention period in 1971 and 1972 designed to deal with these issues became embittered beyond imagination.)*

At the same time, Ernest Mandel, the theoretical and organizational leader of the Fourth International, which at its 1969 World Congress had itself adopted an ultra-left strategy of guerrilla warfare for the entire continent of Latin America, now entered the fray. Mandel attacked Ross for what he called "tailing" the reformism of the NDP, as well as Canadian "bourgeois nationalism," even though he himself later used the term "imperialized imperialism" to describe countries like Canada that shared features of imperialized and colonized countries simultaneously. Mandel's comments gave the green light to the new opposition within the League, and placed added pressure on the Riddell leadership to adapt to their views. In a short while Ross Dowson found himself increasingly isolated in the movement Ross had built over several decades.

Still, he had made every effort to participate in the discussion that ensued and that was supposed to be taking place in a principled and organized fashion. *(He wrote several major internal documents in this period dealing with economic analyses of the Canadian economy.)*

Supporters of Ross's views within the League gathered to form the Labor Party Tendency. Ross and his comrades in the tendency were faced with a painful decision: to remain in an organization which had jettisoned the longstanding traditions of the movement, or to leave in order to preserve those traditions, and in so doing, be excluded from the Fourth International. In 1974, the members of the Labor Party Tendency made a decision: they withdrew from the LSA entirely.

Ironically for Ross, most of his supporters in the new group had been dissidents and critics in the movement who he had not previously appreciated as cadres.

## **PART 5 - AGAINST THE STREAM**

Ross had always understood that the construction of a revolutionary party did not follow a smooth trajectory.

*(Shortly after the Labor Party Tendency left the League for Socialist Action, the LSA renamed itself the Revolutionary Workers' League and disintegrated into various sectarian components, each fiercely attacking each other. In retrospect, the decision by the Labor Party Tendency to leave the LSA was a wise one as it avoided entanglement in a group that was frequently described as a "zoo"—in reality, the product of a politically unprincipled fusion of disparate forces.)*

Ross decided to take a break for the better part of half a year at Camp Poundmaker. Wearing a beekeeper's hat and protective rubber overalls, he ventured into the mosquito-infested rocky terrain to plant hundreds of trees. He breathed the country air, maintained and repaired the lodge, and came as close to relaxing as his active mind would let him. It was a period of self-exile for Ross and it gave him an opportunity to consider and reflect on the future course of the movement.

And then, he was back in Toronto, as suddenly as he left. Shortly after his return, a new organization, the Socialist League, was formed to maintain continuity with the traditions of the League for Socialist Action. Thirty-five members were present at its first meeting. Operating out of the back hall and basement of a bookstore in downtown Toronto, the Socialist League held regular weekly forums and published a monthly paper *Forward*.

*Cameo:* Hugh Dowson, exemplary unionist in the front line of combating Stalinism in his United Autoworker local, dead in 1975.

Although Ross had seen the legacy of the movement destroyed within the LSA, and although the comrades of the Socialist League were now more isolated, he didn't lose hope or confidence. Instead he encouraged the comrades to turn outward and to renew contact with the working class and its political party.

*(In addition to internal responsibilities, Socialist League members applied themselves externally to various areas of activities including provincial NDP riding associations. Through the Left Caucus of the NDP, the League played a critical role at the federal NDP convention in 1973 in Regina, almost succeeding in winning the party to endorse a Socialist Manifesto to commemorate 50 years since the proclamation of the Regina Manifesto. Comrades intervened frequently and actively in the areas of social protest including the labor movement.)*

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, the comrades of the Socialist League, which was renamed the Forward Group in 1978, sustained the Left Caucus in the NDP as a large and influential force in an uneasy alliance with other left tendencies (*publishing the Left Caucus Newsletter over the decade 1984-1993*). The Left Caucus played a critical role at several provincial and federal conventions, including drafting and arguing for left-wing resolutions and providing an organized forum for the expression of socialist ideas within the NDP.

Comrades of the Forward Group were also active in the NDP Committee to Preserve Public Education, a formation which worked closely with teachers unions to support a unified public school system and to stop public funding of private and religious education. (*This important campaign won widespread support within and outside the NDP, with Gordon Doctorow highlighting the issue in his campaign as an NDP candidate in Metro Toronto.*)

*Cameo:* Dale Ritch wins the York University student union presidency under the banner of the United Left Slate.

## **O. Popularizing the Constituent Assembly**

It was also in the early 1980s during the constitutional crisis surrounding the repatriation of Canada's constitution that Ross took the bold and unique initiative among the revolutionary Canadian left of advocating and popularizing the call to convene a Constituent Assembly. In a Forward Group pamphlet widely distributed within the NDP and on the left, Ross called for a broad discussion within the trade unions, professional organizations, and other institutions of civil society. All questions would be up for discussion — the rights of Native Peoples and Québécois for self-determination, collective and social rights such as the right to a job and a safe work environment, the right of women to control their own bodies, the right to decent housing, the right to free education and free healthcare. This perspective resonated during the (*victorious*) campaign for a "No" vote on the Constitution, as leading writers and intellectuals embraced a similar perspective, including those around the magazine *Canadian Forum*.

## **P. In defense of Polish Solidarnosc**

Following the declaration of martial law in Poland in December 1981, the Forward Group was the only organization on the radical left to unequivocally defend the Solidarnosc movement. Three months earlier, at the height of the Polish union movement's strength, a special exclusive edition of *Forward* was published containing the entire program of Solidarnosc. This program called for the socialization of the means of production, the democratization of the bureaucratically degenerated Polish economy and its total reconstitution along lines of autonomous self-administration by the working class. Ross personally distributed thousands of copies of the issue in the west end of Toronto where a Polish population was concentrated in an effort to popularize the radical, pro-socialist platform of Solidarnosc.

(*Forward came to its defence when its leadership was arrested on December 13, 1981. In addition, comrades under Ross' leadership were instrumental in organizing a Committee to Stop the Show Trials, sending monitors to Poland to report on the trials of the leaders of Solidarnosc who were charged by the Stalinist bureaucracy. This was one of several efforts taken under Ross' initiative to defend what he considered to be the most*

*significant workers uprising against Stalinism since the Hungarian revolution in 1956 and the 1969 upheaval in Czechoslovakia.)*

#### **Q. Dowson vs. the RCMP**

Perhaps the best-known contribution that Ross personally made during this period was his campaign to expose the crimes of the RCMP directed against the League for Socialist Action as well as other legitimate organizations. On November 1, 1977, following revelations in the Ontario Legislature that the RCMP had interfered in the Waffle wing of the Ontario NDP because of alleged infiltration by the League for Socialist Action and "ex-Communists," Ross launched a slander suit in Federal Court, claiming damages.

The Socialist Rights Defence Fund was organized to support the suit and it received wide support, including from Noam Chomsky, Linus Pauling, Jessica Mitford, and notable Canadians such as Grace Hartman, Margaret Lawrence, and Pierre Berton. Despite such broad support as well as endorsement of the civil action by major labor councils and by the federal NDP itself, the RCMP stymied the lawsuit—until it was finally forced by public pressure and embarrassment to admit that it had authorized the forging, uttering and circulating of false documents within the LSA and YS, which was criminal conduct on its part.

*Cameo: City-TV special: "R.C.M.P. on Trial," directed by David Sobelman: (Ross Dowson appearing with legal counsel, noted Toronto civil rights lawyer Harry Kopyto)*

*Harry Kopyto: "Mr. Dowson, as a journalist, did you ever write an article advocating violence?"*

*Mr. Dowson: "No sir."*

*Harry Kopyto: "Did you ever give any speeches inciting anyone to riot?"*

*Mr. Dowson: "No sir"*

*Harry Kopyto: "Did you ever break any of the laws of this country, or threaten national security?"*

*Mr. Dowson: "No sir; I have never broken any such law."*

*Harry Kopyto: "What views in your opinion that you hold that could possibly justify this systematic campaign of harassment?"*

*Mr. Dowson: "My views are very easy to ascertain. I have spoken them, I have written them, and I've had them published over a great number of years. As a Canadian, I've always been led to believe that it is not only my right, by my responsibility, to act upon my views."*

*Harry Kopyto: "So you can't find any reason to justify the campaign against you?"*

*Mr. Dowson: "No sir."*

*Harry Kopyto: "Thank you."*

The litigation that Ross started reached the Supreme Court of Canada on two

occasions, and on one of those occasions it resulted in a precedent-setting case affirming the historic right of private prosecution. But we were never able to achieve a hearing against the RCMP Security Service on the merits of our case against them. Nonetheless, Ross's decade-long campaign against RCMP harassment was the most systematic and effective intervention carried out by any left force in Canada, and in fact the *Globe and Mail* described Ross's intervention as being "instrumental" in the replacing of the RCMP Security Service with a civilian review force in the late 1980s.

Although the Forward Group shrank in numbers as did all other revolutionary groups in the 1980s, Ross continued to struggle for the ideas that he kept alive and that motivated him from the time of his youth. While no longer affiliated formally with the Fourth International, Ross and the comrades of the Forward Group continued to identify with the world Trotskyist movement, circulating its publications and documents, defending its program and its principles, and contributing to it financially.

Ross always held to the perspective that Canadian Trotskyists would eventually come together and reconstitute themselves in a common organization once again. However, he felt that such unity could not be artificially imposed or achieved through a mere wish or desire for unity's sake alone. Rather, meaningful organic unity could only be achieved through an extensive process of collaboration in the unfolding struggles of the Canadian working class itself over a period of time.

In 1989 Ross suffered an unexpected stroke that left him partially paralyzed and unable to speak. For the next twelve years he was cared for by his devoted sister Lois Bedard. But his health continued to decline slowly. Finally, on February 17, 2002, Ross died.

It was a day when the bourgeoisie in Canada was able to breathe a little easier.

*Cameo: (Ross Dowson speaking):* "What assures a social change, is this radicalizing experience, plus the cadre. What we're out to do, is we're out to accumulate cadre. We're out to participate in the on-going radicalization, to go through the experience of the class; but we're out to build cadre. That's the main task. It isn't in the immediate gains that are made, the conjunctural gains that are made; but the most important thing is, there are elements (*militants*) in this experience, in the struggle, who gain some important experience, and come feet higher in their understanding, in their concepts. With the widening of cadre, there's a possibility of spanning the unevenness in the development of the class. The cadre is very important to span this ebb and flow and its destruction (*and restitution*) of knowledge and experience, and to generally co-ordinate it. And, particularly when the crisis hits the capitalist system and more elements (*militants*) are thrown into the struggle that can span these difference struggles that develop with differing phases, and differing objectives – spans them and coordinates them in one powerful thrust against the system, and that is the Revolution – that's the Insurrection. That's what's necessary. I don't think we've lost anything in working and participating in the experience of the class in the NDP. I think it is a very key area – in some ways it's a higher level of experience for many workers than (*say*) just women's liberation or

Vietnam – it's a more generalized experience – it tends to develop a political consciousness and raise the level of workers to an understanding that its not enough to fight against elements (*sectors*) of society but to fight against the total society.”  
(*Ed. note: the term “elements” is used in two senses here – from the conclusion of talk #4 in the labor party series appearing elsewhere on this website.*)

### ***THE END***

*This biographical essay is a compilation based on an original script by Harry Kopyto written on April 1, 2002 for the video/DVD production "Ross Dowson, Canadian revolutionary 1917-2002" and includes revisions and editing by Zane Boyd, Gordon Doctorow, and John Darling made for the final video/DVD script as presented on June 8, 2002 on Ryerson campus, Toronto. Copies are available from at [www.rossdowson.com](http://www.rossdowson.com)*

*Copies of another two-part video entitled "55 Years of Struggle: Ross Dowson at 70" (1987) are also available. This set includes personal reminiscences and testimonials of many of Ross's comrades. Both videos will also be available at the Ross Dowson Fonds at National Archives in Ottawa and at Trent University (c/o Bryan Palmer), Peterborough ON as well as at the UBC Library, Vancouver (in the Ruth & Reginald Bullock Collection).*

#### Video #2: Commentaries from the Tribute audience at presentation at Ryerson:

*On-camera reminiscences and comments by:* Bryan Palmer (Labor Historian, Trent University); Lois Bedard, John Glenn, John Bacher, Chris Ross, Harry Kopyto, Phil Courneyeur (on the movement in B.C.), Ken Sutherland, Gord Doctorow, Zane Boyd and Liz Barkeley.

#### *Additional written contributions:*

1974-June8/02-1	p.1: Ken Hiebert letter from Vancouver
1974-June8/02-1	p.2: Diane Mossman letter from Toronto
1974-June8/02-3	p.2: Dick Prinsep letter from Vancouver
1974-June8/02-4	p 3: Abraham Weizfeld letter from Montreal
1974-June8/02-5	p.4: Letter to <i>International Viewpoint</i> from John Glenn and John Darling
1974-June8/02-6	p.5: Announcement of a Ross Dowson anthology project
1974-June8/02-7	p.6: Commentary by J. Darling following video
1974-June8/02-8	p.7: (continuation & end)